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## The Effects of Educational Level on Learner Anxiety: An Investigation of Iranian Learners

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### ABSTRACT

The demanding task of language learning necessitates great efforts on the part of the learners. In the process of learning, some learners are overawed by language anxiety via setting some unreasonable standards. Different factors influence a learner's anxiety one of which is educational level of the learner. In this respect, this study sought to investigate the effects of educational level on learner anxiety. To this end, both learner's educational qualifications and parents' qualification were considered and their influences were measured on the learner anxiety. 150 students were involved who attended some language institutes in Shiraz, Iran. The participants were asked to fill in the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety questionnaire. The statistical analysis applied in this study was Multivariate of Analysis (MANOVA) and the pertinent data were analyzed using SPSS version 22. It came to light that participants with different levels of education and different mother's educational levels did not differ in their anxiety level. In other words, neither learner education nor his or her parents' education had any significant effects on the learner anxiety. Delving into factors which may hamper successful language learning is not only worthwhile but also promising and learner anxiety is one of them.

**Keywords:** *Learner Anxiety, EFL, Educational Level, Language Learner, Anxiety Questionnaire*

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### 1. Introduction

A multitude of people all around the world are learning English as a second or foreign language. Most of these people need English for surviving in the modern life, and they are imbued with great hope and motivation. Classroom environment and teachers' behavior have special effects on the learners. When some unreasonable standards are set and a great number of teachers focus only on the correct performance of the students, the result will be students with unrealistic goals. Attempts at error-free performance would cause many serious problems in learners' performance. In such situations, learners usually have high amount of fear and anxiety in English classes, and they may lose their motivation for the rest of learning. There are various factors which may

influence the learner's anxiety, and learner education is among these factors. To the best of our knowledge, not many researches have been found to examine the effect of learner education on L2 anxiety. The results of this study may cause a change in some of the students' characteristics. The results help the teachers to understand more about the learners and can pave the way for preparing a better environment for learning

As Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008) suggested, language classes have become sites of anxiety. In this situation, learners prefer to avoid performance as they have fear of being criticized by the teacher so they refrain from involving themselves in the class, and this will reduce risk-taking in them. Likewise, Horwitz et al. (1986) argued that foreign language anxiety is a specific syndrome that may be related to

three well known anxieties associated with first language use and everyday life. These are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These three evoke an image of a language learner who is overly concerned with the appearance of his or her communication attempts, or, in other words, a perfectionist learner.

Attempts to make error-free sentences would cause many serious problems in the learners' performance. In such situations, learners have high amounts of fear and anxiety in English classes, and they may lose their motivation for continuing the class. As Akhoondpoor (2008) has maintained, when teachers set high standards and overemphasize correctness, the learners will have error phobia and thus an unpleasant experience in language classes.

Since few previous studies have been conducted on the relationship among learner education and his or her anxiety in language learning institutes, this research can be quite useful in the field of foreign language education. Therefore, the main objectives of the present study are investigating the impact of some learner background variables (including learners' and parents' educational qualifications) on the learner anxiety among Iranian foreign language institute learners. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Does the Iranian English learners' level of education have any effects on their anxiety?
2. Does mother's level of education have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' anxiety?

## **2. Literature Review**

Anxiety could be the anxious reaction to any situation a person undergoes. It is one of the main factors that can affect the student-teacher relationship and students' level of participation and performance in class. This can become more detrimental over time (Dobson, 2012), especially in achieving learning skills (Pishghadam & Akhoondpoor, 2011). As a student's academic performance suffers, the anxiety level related to certain academic tasks increases. It could be detrimental over time as it might affect the overall personality and development of the student, but not every form of anxiety has negative implications. Some could be understood as personal anxious concerns of the students where they strive to excel and outperform other students in the class. The level of competition keeps the student high on spirit

in performing. This level of anxiety is also applicable to EFL students (Huberty, 2009).

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has recently attracted much interest. Hortwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) mentioned foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors connected to classroom language learning process, categorizing it as anxiety associated with learning of a foreign language. Over the consecutive decades, FLA has been a much talked-about subject amongst academicians and practitioners alike, exploring the effect of FLA on learning (Krashen, 1986), academic performance (Coulombe & Roberts, 2001; Yan & Horwitz, 2008), and writing achievements (Chen & Lin, 2009).

However, little is known and researched whether FLA affects the students' determination to study and learn a foreign or a second language. It is believed to be an important initial condition for students to be able to learn the foreign language effectively within the class. Tran, Baldauf & Moni's (2013) study investigated anxious students' experiences in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in order to determine whether their anxiety affected their determination to study English or other foreign languages. This kind of research was carried out since foreign language educators have long been in search of answers to account for the great difficulty faced by a number of students when learning a foreign language where others find it less difficult (Ganschow et al., 1994).

Anxious students, who were faced with difficulties in terms of cognition, were found to have difficulty processing meaningful input and were less responsive to language output (Krashen, 1986). This also has negative implications and influences, which could be both pervasive and subtle, on the three stages of cognitive processing: input, processing and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Some differences may exist between students with educated parents and those whose parents did not possess parents' with university degrees regarding test anxiety over time (Janke, 2017). With regard to achievement and performance in language learning between general FLA and anxieties, research has indicated that both general FLA and anxieties about specific skills, including listening, reading, speaking and writing, have negative effects on student achievement and performance. Significant negative correlations were found between



general FLA and course grades (Coulombe & Roberts, 2001; Yan & Horwitz, 2008), between foreign language listening anxiety and listening course grades (Bekleyen, 2008; Elkhafaifi, 2005), between foreign language reading anxiety and reading scores (Zhao, 2009), between foreign language speaking anxiety and oral scores (Sellers, 2000), and between foreign language writing anxiety and writing achievement (Chen & Lin, 2009).

Foreign language acquisition and affective variables maybe connected in some particular ways and according to Gardner (1997) there has been an increasing trend in the relationships between these variables and foreign language acquisition. It is suggested that FLA or the experience of anxiety, when an individual is working towards learning a foreign language, is among these variables (Oxford, 2005). Some would define FLA as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the (foreign) or second language learning process and the level of language anxiety. FLA is different from threat (situational) kind of anxiety as well as trait (permanent) kind (Spielberger, 1995). Moreover, Weale (2017) carried out a study on 5000 secondary school students in Canada. The aforementioned study sought to identify the relationship between learner anxiety and educational qualification.

FLA is attributable to different sources. The primary sources of language anxiety are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, especially with EFL students. The problems and difficulties faced by ELF students are related to personal perception of language aptitude by the student and certain personality traits and variables of the student. For instance, fear of public speaking, and stressful classroom experiences are all possible causes of anxiety. Hortwitz et al. (1986) and Price (1991) propose that anxiety of this kind cannot be simply justified as having to do with perfectionist approach of the teacher within classroom environment as language anxiety could also be due to how strategically and skillfully has the teacher charted out the teaching plan, keeping in mind different personality traits of every student.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Participants in the current study were 150 male and female English students randomly selected at three different foreign language institutes; however, due to not providing the required information in the questionnaires, 50 were excluded. Classes ranged in size from 8 to 20 students who were of different age groups. All participants were asked to fill out a series of questionnaires which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The participants were selected from 11 classes with different teachers.

#### **3.2. Instruments**

Participants were asked to complete the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The questionnaire developed was pre-examined before conducting the actual survey, as pre-examination assumes a crucial part of research methodology (Craig & Douglas, 2005). The structure of the questions was close ended, so as to get the exact answer in a short time.

In order to carry out the quantitative research, the researcher conducted a questionnaire-based survey on 150 students of three institutes, teaching English and Foreign Languages (EFL), in Shiraz, Iran. Initially, a cover letter explaining the nature and reason of the survey along with a request for conducting it was sent to the selected institutes. Later, upon obtaining permission from the authorities of the institutes, the questionnaires were given to the respective students. The survey was based on voluntary participation of the respondents.

For verifying the data accuracy, two factors needed to be sorted out, namely data validity and data reliability. A questionnaire is held valid only when it is successful in entailing the true responses appropriate to the information looked-for. Thus, in meeting such a need, it is essential that the questionnaire developed is easy to understand by the respondents, just as the researcher intends them to understand.

In the present study, to establish the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to a number of professors and they were asked to mark inappropriate items for the survey among the EFL students. Berdie & Anderson, (1974) also opined that, reliability factor of the questionnaires depends on the stability, observed over time-meaning that the particular set of questions will convey the same consistent meaning to all individual across time and nature. To ensure the reliability of the

questionnaire developed in the current study, the researcher applied the Alpha Cronbach computer reliability analysis for the statistical tool. The minimum reliability co-efficient value according to Cronbach & Gleser, (1957) should be 0.60, which in the present study it was proved to be 0.9, thus stabilizing a satisfactory reliability co-efficient.

**3.3. Procedure**

Since this study involves quantitative analysis of EFL students of three institutes in Iran to analyze the learners' anxiety, different methods of research including exploratory and descriptive ones have been applied to explore the data on factors which contribute to the learner's anxiety. The results of literature survey will then be applied to descriptively determine the factors within the sample.

The subjects of this study were selected from elementary and intermediate adult students of three English language institutes in Shiraz, Iran. A total of 150 students were asked to fill out the questionnaires. The classes in each institute have 7 to 17 students, belonging to heterogeneous age groups and there were in average 10 classes in each institute. 6 out of 10 classes in each institute were accessed and was all the students were asked to participate in the survey.

**4. Findings and Discussion**

In the present quantitative study, SPSS software, version 22 was utilized to analyze the data collected. The responses from the contributors were quantitatively coded and the data were put into the excel, which was further transferred to the SPSS file. Descriptive statistics- frequency analysis and inferential statistics- correlation and regression analysis were used.

**4.1. MANOVA Results for Education among Students**

One of the factors related to the learners' background information was the learners' education, which was also tested to see its effect on their perfectionism and anxiety. To further analyze the differences among the students of different educational groups such as elementary school, high school or equivalent, vocational/technical school (2 years), Bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctoral degree, professional degree, and the others, we used descriptive statistics. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the studied groups, revealing that those learners

who had vocational education had the highest mean in the learner anxiety.

**Table 1: Means and standard deviations of students with different educational background**

Variable	Education	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learner Anxiety	high	3.0957	.16606
	vocational	3.1932	.20489
	BA	3.1652	.38594
	MA	3.1174	.47074
	doctoral	2.8788	.23667
	others	2.9495	.08056

To check whether the differences were statistically significant, we conducted a multivariate test on the learner education. Findings from the multivariate test of Wilk's Lambda showed Wilks'  $\Lambda = .759$ ,  $F(12, 166) = 2.750$ ,  $p = .003$ . The detailed results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Multivariate test for learner anxiety by education**

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	
Education	Wilks' Lambda	.759	2.75	10	186	.003	.0129

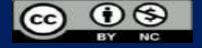
To identify the effects of the independent variable of learner education on learner anxiety, we further conducted univariate analysis. The results are displayed in Table 3. The findings showed that there was a non-significant main effect for learner anxiety in the case of education. In other words, education doesn't seem to have an influence on anxiety among learners.

**Table 3: Tests of between-subjects effects (education)**

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Sq.	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Education	Anxiety	.522	5	.104	.944	.457

**4.2. MANOVA Results for Mothers' Education among the Students**

To analyze the differences among Iranian students whose mothers had different educational levels on their anxiety, we estimated the means. The means and standard deviations of the different groups are presented in Table 4. Those whose mothers had elementary education obtained higher means for learners' anxiety in comparison with other groups. Multivariate test was conducted on the variable mothers' education to check whether the differences were statistically significant.



**Table 4:** Means and standard deviations of students with different mothers' educational level

Variable	Mothers' education	Mean	Std. Deviation
Anxiety	elementary	3.3636	.83841
	High school	3.0465	.17440
	vocational	3.0415	.19799
	BA	3.1302	.29051
	MA	3.1582	.24655
	doctoral	3.1174	.22989
	professional	3.0707	.33379
	other	3.2381	.48044

A MANOVA test was performed to determine any effect of mothers' educational level on the learners' anxiety. The multivariate test was performed on the data at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings from the multivariate test of Wilk's Lambda showed a non-significant mothers' educational level main effect (Wilks'  $\Lambda = .789$ ,  $F = 1.632$ ,  $p = .074$ ) which showed that mothers' educational level didn't have any effects on the research variable of learner anxiety. The detailed results are shown in Table 5 below.

**Table 5:** Multivariate test for learners' perfectionism and anxiety by mothers' educational level

Effect	Value	F	Hyp df	Error df	Sig	Partial Eta Sq	
Mother's Education	Wilks Lambda	.789	1.632	14.000	182	.074	.112

Anxiety assumes one of the prominent factors affecting the student-teacher relationship and students' level of participation and performance in class (Dobson, 2012). Mostly teachers' behavior and standards of perfectionism set in classroom foster the improvement of the learners, resulting in rendering a threatening environment than an effective teaching-learning experience.

In this study, it was found that learner education, as a learner background variable, and learner anxiety are not related. However, Weale (2017) reported the results of a study on 5000 students, showing that learner anxiety and educational qualifications were related. Moreover, our results were in contrast with those of Pianta et al. (2012) who found that factors such as learners' background influenced their anxiety and also that of Jank et al.'s (2017) who asserted that those students who had educated parents experienced less test anxiety and had greater satisfaction. Moreover, Bjelland et al. (2008) asserted that low educational levels were significantly associated with both anxiety and depression and the protective effect of education accumulated somewhat with time. Likewise, Garcia (2014) indicated that patient education was effective in

preventing and reducing anxiety; also, Ramezanzadeh et al. (2004) stated that anxiety had a significant relationship with educational level.

Teachers can play significant roles in reducing the learners' anxiety. Classroom environment and teachers' behavior exert special effects on the learners, where the teachers mostly set high standards, overemphasize correctness, making the students try to be perfectionists with unrealistic goals. Such behavior of the teacher in some cases leads to error phobia, resulting in learners experiencing high levels of fear and anxiety in classrooms.

## 5. Conclusion

This study was conducted to find the effects of learners' background variable of education on L2 anxiety. We aimed to improve learning and teaching environment to have a better learning and teaching experience. Based on the findings, those learners who had vocational education had the highest mean in learner anxiety. Moreover, those whose mothers had elementary education had the highest learner anxiety in comparison with other groups though the results turned non-significant. In other words, education does not significantly affect the learner's anxiety.

English teachers and learners benefit from the results of this study. First, teachers become aware of the significance of their behavior in the classroom environment and as a results show how they can have even influence their learners' anxiety. The present study provides the teachers with awareness of the interactions between the learners and teachers. Second, teachers' awareness can lead to an improvement in classroom environment in which both teachers and learners can benefit more from a friendly, supportive and learning environment.

Anxiety from which the students suffer while attending foreign language classes in which they are not at all familiar can be lessened if the teachers have a friendly approach towards the learners. Most of the learners come from varied backgrounds and have little familiarity with the English language. Such a scenario renders a challenging task to acquire effective language skills. In this case, the students' friendly approach and a clear understanding of the standards of achievement along with the need behind such achievement will encourage them to strive on their own, without the coercion of the teachers.

Reluctance and nervousness will be replaced by enjoyment. The present study helps the learners to know more about their anxiety reasons and results and it gives them a conscious view of their behavior as a learner in the learning environment, the result of which is tackling with their anxiety factors successfully and trying to manage them.

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### Appendix: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

Tick the applicable box. Boxes are based on **5 Likert scale**, where 1 denotes *strongly agree*, 2- *agree*, 3- *neutral*, 4- *disagree* and 5- *strongly disagree*.

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am Speaking in my foreign language class					
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class					
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class					
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language					
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes					
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course					
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am					
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class					
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class					
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class					
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes					
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know					
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class					
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers					
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting					
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it					
17. I often feel like not going to my language class					
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class					
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make					
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class					
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get					
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class					
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do					
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students					
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind					
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes					
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class					
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed					
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says					
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language					
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language					
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language					
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance					