

# **The Relationship between Gender and Iranian EFL Learners' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Foreign language anxiety is widely used to describe the feeling of tension and apprehension, which is specifically associated with foreign language learning contexts, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) is related to foreign language anxiety and language-skill-specific anxiety, and fairly recently identified as distinguished from other forms of anxiety. FLCA is a more general type of anxiety in learning a foreign language with a strong speaking anxiety element; and low self-confidence is identified as an important component of its construct. Research shows that FLCA is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon; it has many potential sources; and it interferes with the acquisition, retention, and production of a foreign language. It seems that in most of English classes in Iran little attention has been paid to the role of the gender on EFL learners' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). Hence, this study attempted to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) with regard to gender. The data were gathered through questionnaire: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The participants were 52 students studying English at Salmas University. The findings revealed a significant relationship between FLCA and females. It was recommended that foreign language teachers should be aware of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) level, its causes and results. The study also offers some context-specific pedagogical implications for Iranian EFL teachers and practitioners

**KEY WORDS:** Anxiety, Foreign language, Gender

## **INTRODUCTION**

Foreign language learning anxiety has been the subject of a growing body of research that indicates anxiety routinely affects many language learners. Although in the past there were few studies of classroom anxiety of Asian learners. Foreign language anxiety has been of interest to language educators for decades. The psychological construct of foreign language anxiety is multidimensional (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Young, 1992). Some researchers argued that foreign language anxiety might contribute to the feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Oxford, 1999), while other scholars believed some anxiety may actually enhance foreign language performance (Chastain, 1975; Scott, 1986; Steinberg, 1982) or found no relationship between

anxiety and language proficiency performance (Young, 1990). It is clear from the previous research that the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning was complex and presented some conflicting evidence<sup>5</sup>). Therefore the purpose of this study is to find the relationship between gender and Iranian EFL learners' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety.

## **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

According to Harmer (1991), some of the reasons to learn English as a foreign language are school curricula, need of advancement in professional life, living in a target community permanently or temporarily, interest in different cultures, and some other specific purposes. At the end of the learning process, learners are usually expected to become proficient in several areas of the target language, such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, discourse, and language skills. On the other hand, it is obvious that the learning of English as a foreign language is closely and directly related to the awareness about certain individual differences, such as the beliefs, attitudes, aptitudes, motivations and affective states of learners. Among these variables, particularly language anxiety as an individual difference is an affective state seriously impeding achievement in a foreign language (Gardner, 1985). Hence, one of the purposes of the present study is to examine the sources and levels of language anxiety among EFL learners.

Anxiety as an affective state is defined as an uncomfortable emotional state in which one perceives danger, feels powerless, and experiences tension in the face an expected danger and it can be classified into three types. *Trait anxiety*, a more permanent disposition to be anxious (Scovel, 1978), is viewed as an aspect of personality. *State anxiety* is an apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation (Spielberger, 1983). Finally, the last of the three types, *situation-specific anxiety* is related to apprehension unique to specific situations and events (Ellis, 1994). Language anxiety is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Drawing upon the synthesis of previous research on foreign language anxiety, Gardner and MacIntyre (1994) describe the concept as the apprehension experienced when a specific situation requires the use of a second language in which the individual is not fully proficient. To sum up, language anxiety falls under the category of situation-specific anxiety. Foreign language anxiety has three varieties. *Communication apprehension* occurs in cases where learners lack mature communication skills although they have mature ideas and thoughts. It refers to a fear of getting into real communication with others. *Test anxiety*, on the other hand, is an apprehension towards academic evaluation. It could be defined as a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either consciously or unconsciously by learners in many situations. This type of anxiety concerns apprehension towards academic evaluation which is based on a fear of failure (Horwitz and Young, 1991). Finally, *fear of negative evaluation* is observed when foreign language learners feel incapable of making the proper social impression and it is an apprehension towards evaluations by others and avoidance of evaluative situations. The research also aims to investigate the levels and sources of fear of negative evaluation on the part of EFL learners, and it focuses on the relationship between language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation among EFL learners. The

results of the previously conducted studies regarding foreign language anxiety indicate those personal and impersonal anxieties, learners' beliefs about learning a foreign language, teachers' beliefs about teaching a foreign language, classroom procedures and testing are among the main sources of anxiety (Young, 1991). Furthermore, a review of the related literature reveals that the level of language course, language skills, motivation, proficiency, teachers, tests, and culture (Ellis and Rathbone, 1987; Young, 1990; Price, 1991; Sparks and Ganschow, 1991; Oxford, 1992) are other factors arousing anxiety. However, it should be noted that prior studies focused on the identification of foreign language anxiety. For instance, Horwitz (1986) developed the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) to measure communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The results of this study suggest that language anxiety is distinct from other types of anxiety. Furthermore, it was the study of Gardner, Moorcroft, and MacIntyre (1987) that distinguished language anxiety from others. The findings of the study conducted by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) aiming to measure the three types of language anxiety – i.e., communication apprehension, test-anxiety and fear of negative evaluation – demonstrated that communication anxiety includes fear of negative evaluation as well. The findings of the previous studies also indicate that there exists a significant correlation between foreign language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, an issue that has attracted little attention in language learning research (Kitano, 2001). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), fear of negative evaluation is triggered by the teacher as a fluent speaker and the classmates. Young (1991) argued that the reason why learners do not participate in the classroom activities is the fear of committing a verbal error. Similarly, Price's study (1991) indicated that learners are afraid of making pronunciation errors in classroom. Finally, speaking in front of their peers is another source of anxiety in learning a foreign language (Koch and Terrell, 1991).

A review of available literature indicates that related studies conducted in Turkey are too limited. The findings of one of these studies (Dalkılıç, 2001), which focused on the relationship between achievement and foreign language anxiety, showed that foreign language anxiety is a significant variable affecting learners' achievement. In another study (Koralp, 2005) aiming to investigate the anxiety levels of students and to determine the relationship among different types of anxiety, it was discovered that there is a positive correlation between test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. While two other studies (Atay and Kurt, 2006, 2007) focused on the effects of peer feedback on writing anxiety, Öztürk and Çeçen (2007) investigated the effect of portfolio keeping on foreign language writing and suggested that portfolio keeping is a significant factor that alleviates anxiety. Finally, in a study conducted by Batumlu and Erden (2007), the relationship between language and anxiety was examined. The findings of this study suggest that there is a negative correlation between achievement and anxiety; whereas, the proficiency levels of learners and gender are not significant variables.

English as a foreign language is a must course in primary, secondary and higher education in Turkey. The number of EFL learners is approximately 11 million at primary, 6 million at secondary and vocational (Ministry of National Education, 2006), and 2 million students at higher schools (Turkish Statistics Institute, 2007). However, despite the vast number of EFL learners in Turkey, research activities on EFL issues, as was previously articulated, are too limited. To put it another way, it is not possible to draw general conclusions regarding the level of foreign language anxiety level and the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and

foreign language anxiety. There are two basic reasons to call for investigation into foreign language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation among EFL learners. First, the related studies conducted in Turkey are too limited to draw general conclusions. As for the second reason, as was noted by Kitano (2001), fear of negative evaluation is an issue that has attracted little attention in language learning research. In a study by Mills, Pajares, & Herron. (2006), the relationship among anxiety, self-efficacy, and French proficiency in reading and listening skills was examined. It was found that students' reading self-efficacy in French had a positive relationship with their reading proficiency, whereas reading anxiety was not a determining factor. Listening anxiety was found to have a positive relationship with listening proficiency of both male and female students.

Matsuda and Gobel (2004) investigated the possible relationship between general foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA), gender, extended overseas experience, and classroom performance. Two-hundred and fifty-two students from Japanese university took part in this study. The results of the study revealed that "the factor related to self-confidence in speaking English seemed to be significantly affected by overseas experience" (p. 21). Regarding the predictors of success in English classes, it was found that "self-confidence in speaking English, gender and proficiency played an important role in classroom performance of first-year students" (p. 21).

English has long since been a major subject in Iran; however, despite the continued increasing demand to learn English, and the emphasis it is given at the high school level, still today students enter the university with many language related problems. Although many reasons can be accounted for the students' difficulty in learning English, it is felt that by reducing negative affective factors such as anxiety, it is possible to get one step closer to helping our students learn English more effectively. By understanding the relationship between English learning anxiety and overall English achievement of students, teachers can hopefully help their students receive better learning effects in a low-anxiety learning environment. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the following research question: Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL learners' gender and their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) level?

## **THE STUDY**

### **RESEARCH QUESTION:**

1. Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL learners' gender and their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) level?

## **RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

**Ho:** There is no significant correlation between the age of the learners' and their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) Level.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section introduces the participants, the instruments and the data analysis, discussion and finally conclusion.

**PARTICIPANTAS**

The participants in this study were 52 (20 male and 32 female) Iranian EFL students taking part in Salmas Azad university.

**INSTRUMENTATION**

The study employed a closed-ended questionnaire with a three-point Likert scale (disagree, uncertain, and agree). The items of the questionnaire were the modified versions of the items developed by Horwitz et al. (1986).

**PROCEDURE**

The questionnaire was distributed by the first researcher among undergraduate students at their classroom. They were required to select a choice, which best fitted their characteristics in their view. In order to ensure the participants’ understanding of the questionnaires, a brief glossary was provided at the end of each questionnaire. Some terms which were considered to be difficult for the students were explained using the definitions provided in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary(Hornby, 2000) and Oxford Learner’sPocket Dictionary (Manser, 1998). Moreover, if the students had any questions concerning the items in the questionnaires, the researcher was ready to answer them and help them understand the items.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis has been done with package for social sciences (SPSS) software.

In the present study the (T test) statistics were used to analyze collected data.

**Figure1: Mean and standard deviation of the scores  
T-Test**

**Group Statistics**

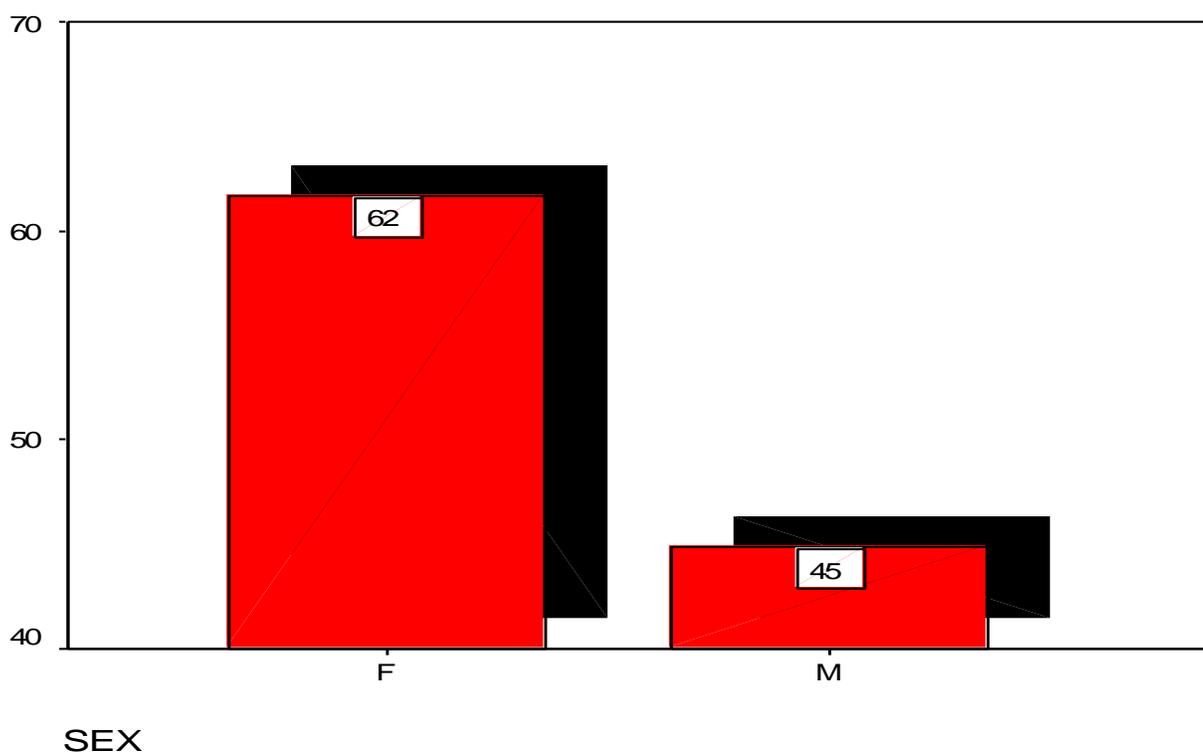
SEX		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
EFL	F	32	61.6697	8.61705	1.52329
	M	20	44.8600	6.79570	1.51956

**Figure 2: Independent samples test for equality of means**

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
EFL	Equal variances assumed	1.511	.225	7.395	50	.000	16.8097	2.27297	12.24430	21.37508
	Equal variances not assumed			7.813	47.175	.000	16.8097	2.15163	12.48160	21.13778

**Figure3: This Graf shows the superiority of female**



**DISCUSSION**

The results indicate that Iranian female EFL learners have scored higher mean in all anxiety categories than male learners'. We can claim that in Iranian EFL context male has less anxiety to learn English. The results of this study support those Matsuda and Gobel (2004) whose

believes that gender played an important role in classroom anxiety . In addition the result of this study contradicted with Mills, Pajares, & Herron. (2006) whose believes that FL anxiety has a positive relationship with both male and female students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of the study one may also conclude that affective factors seem to play a more important role in the performance of females than males. The findings reveal a stronger relationship between FLCA and females while this relationship is much weaker for males. The findings of this study are important for researchers, university teaching staff, and the students themselves. It is hoped that increasing and extensive knowledge about the dynamics of foreign language anxiety will guide foreign language educators and researchers. Thus, these people will be in a better position to help reduce anxiety in the English classroom that will better benefit the students' English language learning. Female EFL learners suffer from language anxiety which is aroused by factors, such as unpreparedness for class; communication apprehension with teachers, teachers' questions and corrections in classroom environment; tests and negative attitudes towards English courses. Female EFL learners suffer from language anxiety which is aroused by factors fear of negative evaluation consist of negative judgments by others, leaving unfavorable impressions on others, making verbal or spelling mistakes, and disapproval by others. The fear of negative evaluation is a strong source of foreign language anxiety. Moreover, fear of negative evaluation leads to the fear of being called on in class; test anxiety; fear of making mistakes while speaking; and negative attitudes towards language learning. What is more, it makes learners anxious when their teachers asks questions and makes corrections. Finally, certain subject variables significantly correlated with some sources of language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. More specifically, females are much more worried than males are.

## **LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

The present study suffers from some limitations. One drawback, relates to the limited number of the participants. This was due to the small number of the EFL students registered at Salmas University. Further studies might be needed to explore this issue with a larger sample. In other word, the results cannot be generalized to all Iranian EFL educational settings due to the fact that the participants were selected from two foreign language classes in Iran. Thus, there is an essential need for future research to cross-validate findings achieved from this study to some different and larger gender-based sample of EFL classrooms in Iran. Another drawback, relates to the data collection technique .the only data collection technique was questionnaire .it is suggested that researches employ other data collection technique, e.g. observation, face to face interview in order to obtain more comprehensive picture of such complex issue as language anxiety.

## **SUGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Important variables, such as types of class and four language skills, may contribute to differences in foreign language anxiety, and should be examined systematically in future investigations. The inclusion of these two variables (curriculum design and instructors' teaching styles) would be a pertinent research undertaking. Lastly, one major future research question would be whether there is any relationship between foreign language learning anxiety and curriculum design and EFL instructors' teaching styles. Teachers are actively engaged in and their utilized teaching procedures can play a crucial role in making learners become anxious or not in their FL learning. This issue, however, is not specifically addressed in the present study; therefore, the research studies investigating how teachers' methodology reduce or enhance the amount of FL anxiety experienced by EFL learners can provide a better understanding of this affective variable.

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