

## Investigating foreign language anxiety in Iranian classrooms: The effect of gender

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### *Abstract*

In an attempt to delve into the issue of affective variables related to language learning, the present study focuses on the influence of gender on learners' foreign language anxiety in the Iranian context. The objective of this case study is first to determine the extent to which Iranian EFL learners perceive foreign language anxiety in matched-gender and mixed-gender classrooms and second to see if there is any significant difference between the two types of the investigated classrooms. To this end, a 16 items self-reporting questionnaire with a five Likert-type scale was designed. The developed questionnaire was then given to 96 Iranian lower intermediate EFL learners to complete it. After analyzing the collected data, the findings indicated that mixed-gender classrooms can be considered as an anxiety-provoking teaching context in Iran, since the presence of the opposite gender in EFL classrooms was found to cause statistically significant amount of language anxiety among Iranian learners. The study also offers some context-specific pedagogical implications for Iranian EFL teachers and practitioners.

**Keywords:** foreign language anxiety; mixed-gender classrooms; matched-gender classrooms; EFL learners

## Investigating foreign language anxiety in Iranian classrooms: The effect of gender

### 1. Introduction

Language learning situations are prone to be susceptible to some affective-arousal elements in which EFL learners perceive them to varying degrees. Brown (2000) argues that the above challenges are incorporated into the affective domain of second/foreign language learning which includes several factors such as empathy, self-esteem, inhibition, motivation, and anxiety. These socio-culturally-oriented factors seem to vary across different countries. The nature of these variables centrally revolves around some context-sensitive feelings and emotions discerned by language learners across various contexts (Brown, 2000). At the heart of this affective domain lies an important variable called *Foreign Language (FL) Anxiety* which can significantly influence the development of language learning among EFL learners in the given localized teaching contexts (Horwitz, 2001; McIntyre, 1995). According to Shrestha (2009), language teachers should be sensitive to foreign language teaching anxiety in their classrooms in order to make their teaching ecologically sound. Concerning the significance of this variable, it is interesting to note that more than half of foreign language learners perceive some kinds of it in their language classrooms (Worde, 1998) while even many successful language learners also experience this type of anxiety in their classrooms (Horwitz, 2000).

To date, FL anxiety has been investigated to a large extent. Research of this kind includes some studies aimed at exploring FL anxiety from learners' perspective (e.g. Granschow et al., 1994; Gregersen, 2005; Seller, 2000; Young, 1990, to name but a few). In the area of FL anxiety, researchers have mainly intended to probe and estimate FL anxiety factors in relation to the macro-skills included in the broad notion of learner *language proficiency* aside from the recent viewpoints voiced by Mahmoodzadeh (2012) in which language anxiety is viewed and explored from within the learner's inter-language system including the learner's inter-language phonology, inter-language grammar, and 'inter-language meaning system' in order to come up with a rational approach to scrutinize the crux of the issue more comprehensively. In addition, FL anxiety has also been viewed from other perspectives, for example, from teachers' perspectives (see, for example, Kota, 2005; Young, 1992). In another vein, FL anxiety has been claimed to be also true for many non-native teachers (see Horwitz, 1996 and Kim & Kim, 2004 for a comprehensive account of the discussed issues). That is, granted that before non-native teachers get engaged in language teaching, they are non-native learners whose language is not perfect, such lack of confidence can "inhibit a teacher's ability to effectively present the target language, interact with students and serve as a positive role model as a language learner" (Horwitz, 1996, p. 366). In recent years, foreign language teaching anxiety has been explored among pre-service EFL teachers in a few countries such as Turkey (see Merç, 2011 for the detailed sources of foreign language student teacher anxiety in the Turkish context). As a result, some general sources of language teaching anxiety have been identified such as limited English proficiency, lack of confidence, class management, insufficient class preparation, teaching procedures, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of teaching experience.

However, as Lee (2003) reminds language researchers, ethno-cultural and ecological aspects of teaching contexts should be seriously taken into consideration while dealing with affective variables such as language anxiety since culture and language are thoroughly interrelated and that these variables are not developed in vacuum. In fact, these variables are socio culturally constructed and are also gradually crystallized based on the needs and demands of localized contexts. In this respect, Lee, Su Kim (2003) believes that

*Teachers and practitioners should be aware that the classroom is not a neat, self-contained mini-society isolated from the outside world but an integral part of the larger society where the reproduction of many forms of domination and resistance based on gender, ethnicity, class, race, religion is a daily event (p. 9).*

However, to the author's knowledge, no research study has been conducted to investigate particularly the impacts of gender-based EFL classrooms, namely, matched-gender versus mixed-gender classrooms on the state of learners' foreign language anxiety among Arab countries or Asian Islamic countries like Iran in which gender may have a crucial role in accounting for affective variables such as foreign language anxiety which is perceived by EFL learners. Thus, the present case study shall aim at examining the influence of matched-gender and mixed-gender EFL classrooms on Iranian learners' foreign language anxiety to come up with a deeper understanding of this affective variable in the Iranian context. Hence, this study might add a new perspective to language anxiety research carried out in Iran over the last decades.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 What is language anxiety?

Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with the arousal of the nervous system. However, in an attempt to define *language anxiety*, Scovel (1978) argues that it should be born in mind that even though we all know what language anxiety is and we all have experienced feelings of anxiousness, anxiety is still not easy to define in a simple sentence. "It is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry" (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 151). To put it in another word, anxiety can be generally associated with "threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening" (Pappamihel, 2002, p. 331). In addition, Gregersen (2005) argues that learners who feel anxious in their foreign language learning may find their study less enjoyable. Furthermore, for learners, the situation regarding speech or public speaking anxiety can be generally worsening with the involvement of a foreign language in the classroom; therefore, EFL learners are perhaps more likely to experience public speech anxiety as compared with other types of learners (Hsu, 2012).

### 2.2 Factors contributing to FL anxiety

The components of foreign language anxiety have been identified (Horwitz, et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989) to narrow down this concept into researchable issues: (1) communication apprehension or anxiety. (2) Fear of negative evaluation. (3) Test anxiety. The consolidation of these factors thus leads to the creation of anxiety in language learners.

Communication apprehension generally refers to a type of anxiety experienced in interpersonal communicative settings (McCroskey, 1987) which is obviously relevant to second/foreign language learning contexts. More particularly, in the language classroom where the learners have little control of the communicative situation, and their performance is constantly monitored by both their teacher and peers (Horwitz, et al., 1986), communication apprehension seems to be augmented in relation to the learners' negative self-perceptions caused by the inability to understand others and make themselves understood (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The particular manifestation of communication apprehension in the classroom includes oral communication anxiety, such as difficulty in speaking in matched-gender/mixed-gender dyads and groups as well as the anxiety related to stage fright. In fact, communication apprehension is generally a type of shyness characterized by fear of anxiety about communicating with people in any given situations.

Concerning the fear of negative evaluation, as Young (1991) argues, "students are more concerned about how (i.e., when, what, where, or how often) their mistakes are corrected rather than whether error correction should be administered in class" (p. 429). In this sense, it seems that teachers' beliefs about language teaching may act as some obstacles for L2 learners and thus create language anxiety in them because the assumptions of the teachers as to their role in the language classroom may not always correspond to the individual needs or expectations that L2 learners would consider for their teachers.

Test anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure. Test anxiety is likewise

believed to be one of the most important aspects of negative motivation. It can be defined as “unpleasant feeling or emotional state that has physiological and behavioral concomitants and that is experienced in formal testing or other evaluative situations” (Dusek 1980, p. 88). Test-anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is a failure. Students who are test-anxious in a foreign language class probably experience considerable difficulty since tests and quizzes are frequent and even the brightest and most prepared students often make errors (Horwitz, et al., 1986).

### *2.3 The impact of FL anxiety on language learning*

Over the last decades, the general impacts of FL anxiety on learners have produced conflicting results. In the light of the studies directed at examining the correlation between anxiety and language learning thus far, the overall findings are fairly inconsistent and contradictory. In this sense, Young (1991) contends that "research in the area of anxiety as it relates to second or foreign language learning and performance is scattered and inconclusive" (p. 426).

With respect to this research-based incongruity, many researchers have argued that FL anxiety is essentially *debilitative*. That is, it can have negative effects on learners' academic achievement (see for example, Onwuegbuzie, et al., 1999; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001). In contrast, some researchers (e.g. Kleinmann, 1977), however, have assumed a positive role for language anxiety in regard to foreign language learning and thus have considered FL anxiety *facilitative*. In this sense, Bailey (1983) suggests the benefit of anxiety in language learning. Bailey studied students' diaries to analyze their competitiveness and anxiety during a language class. The students' comments centered on four major themes: (1) their reaction to the class, (2) their preference for a democratic class, (3) their need to succeed and to receive positive reinforcement, and (4) their competitiveness. In general, their anxiety grew out of their apprehension of having to communicate, their concern about tests, and their fear of negative evaluation. Thus, the study explained the positive effects of competitiveness by means of the formation of facilitative anxiety in learners.

### *2.4 The impact of teaching practices on learners' FL anxiety*

Given the employed teaching practices play a key role in making learners become anxious or not in their FL learning (Worde, 1998), it can also be assumed that teachers' attitude and personality can affect language anxiety. For example, consider the absolutely teacher-centered EFL classrooms in some given teaching contexts where teachers have the dominant role in the class. This type of teachers cannot act as a language facilitator in some societies in which students do not welcome teacher-dominant classrooms because they are not attuned to this change of teaching behavior. In addition, assuming that these teachers can seriously inhibit the process of language learning in some local educational contexts, these teachers may be regarded as threatening pedagogues by the students.

In this sense, Young (1991) similarly argues that those language teachers who believe their profession requires them to correct students' errors immediately and constantly and who do not allow students to work in pairs in fear that the whole class may fall into a chaos may bring out considerable learner language anxiety. On the contrary, teachers' characteristics, such as being friendly, patient, relaxed and humorous, however, can significantly alleviate students' language anxiety (Young, 1990).

### *2.5 The impact of FL anxiety on productive skills*

Several investigators (e.g. Aida, 1994; Subaşı, 2010) have examined the effects of FL anxiety on the oral performance in the EFL classroom. To elaborate more on these studies, two of them are particularly discussed here. Ganschow et al. (1994) did a study exploring differences in foreign language anxiety and native oral and written language skills among college students. The results of the study revealed that students significantly do differ in their English oral and written achievements in terms of the amount of FL anxiety they suffer from. In another study, Young (1990) investigated the students' perspective on anxiety and speaking. To this end, a

questionnaire was designed to identify sources of anxiety over speaking in FL and then was administered to 135 university level Spanish students and 109 high school students. Results of the data analysis indicated that speaking in FL was not exclusively the source of student anxiety, but that speaking in front of the class was and when the instructor's error correction attitude was relaxed and positive, language could be greatly reduced. In addition, some investigators have studied writing apprehension and its effects on students' performance in FL courses (see for example, Cheng, 2002 and 2004; Cheng, et al., 1999). Likewise, Saito and Samimy (1996) examined the relationship between anxiety and the study of Japanese and noted that attitude and motivation, along with anxiety, were significant factors affecting student performance over time.

### *2.6 The impact of FL anxiety on receptive skills*

Sellers (2000) devoted an outstanding study to examining the relationship between language anxiety and reading comprehension in Spanish as a foreign language. The issues addressed were: (1) the effect language anxiety on the reading comprehension and recall of university level language student (2) the effects of language anxiety on the reading process itself. The results revealed that anxiety does affect the reader's concentration on a reading task and on the comprehension of the passage. On the contrary, Matsuda and Gobel (2001) investigated the possible link between foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) among Japanese university students and reported the results that contradicted the above-mentioned results, that is, they found that FLCA and FLRA are clearly independent constructs. In the same vein, Sadighi, et al. (2009) examined the relationship between listening comprehension (LC) and FLCA among Iranian university students and found that there was no relation between LC and FLCA.

On the other hand, several researchers have also aimed at studying anxiety and its relationship to listening comprehension (e.g. Elkhafaifi, 2005; Lund, 1991). The corollary of these studies manifested that anxiety impedes listening comprehension. For example, Elkhafaifi (2005) examined the relationship between listening FL anxiety and listening comprehension in the Arabic classrooms. The findings of this study, however, turned to yield similar results being consonant with the above-mentioned results, that is, listening anxiety like other language skills also correlates negatively with listening achievement.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 Research Questions*

The present study attempts to find the answers to the following research questions:

- A. To what extent do Iranian EFL learners perceive foreign language anxiety in matched-gender classrooms?
- B. To what extent do Iranian EFL learners perceive foreign language anxiety in mixed-gender classrooms?
- C. Is there any significant difference between matched-gender and mixed-gender EFL classrooms concerning learners' foreign language anxiety in the Iranian context?

### *3.2 Participants*

The participants of the study comprised 96 adults EFL learners learning English at lower intermediate level at two foreign language institutes in Mashhad, Iran. The participants were selected through a convenience sampling. One half of these participants (N=48) were sitting in on 5 mixed-gender EFL classrooms in one foreign language institute and the other half of the participants (N=48) were sitting in on 4 matched-gender EFL classrooms in another foreign language institute. The selected learners of the latter language institute consisted in two male-oriented matched-gender classrooms (N=27) and two female-oriented matched-gender classrooms

(N=21). The age range of the participants varied from 17 to 26 with the mean of 21.5 years. The criterion of the above-mentioned English language institutes for placement of their learners was based on *ACTFL Oral proficiency Interview (OPI)* following the *ACTFL Proficiency Guide Lines* (Novice Low, Novice Mid, Novice High, Intermediate Low, Intermediate Mid, Intermediate High, Advance Low, Advance Mid, Advanced High, and Superior). Also, the course books used for instruction in these language institutes included Interchange Series and KAC Series (the local course books designed by Kish Air Language Institute).

### 3.3 Instrument

The most well-known instrument for measuring FL classroom anxiety has been *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* over the last few decades due to its high validity and reliability. However, since the role of gender-based variables in EFL classrooms is examined in this study, the researcher attempted to modify some of the items included in FLCAS (Horwitz, et al., 1986) and reduced it to 16 items. To do so, first the researcher divided the anxiety factors into two perceptible categories: 1) *lack of confidence and communication comprehension*, and 2) *fear of making mistake and negative evaluation*. In this way, it was felt possible to explore the impacts of gender-related issues of EFL classrooms on learners' FL anxiety in the Iranian context. Second, the researcher attempted to develop a self-reporting questionnaire mainly on the basis of the FLCAS due to its well-established validity and reliability. Thus, some items in the inventory of the FLCAS were totally deleted or were modified to meet the aims of the study and to increase the suitability of the item construction (see Appendix). The items are described in the following:

\*Items related to *the lack of confidence and communication comprehension*: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, & 15

\*Items related to *the fear of making mistake and negative evaluation*: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, & 16

### 3.4 Procedure

First, to ensure that the participants had no problem in understanding the questionnaire, the present researcher translated the developed self-reporting questionnaire from English version into Persian version. Second, in order to assure the validity of the questionnaire and consider more cautiously the influence of cross-culturally conceptual transfer of the items, the questionnaire was then given to three experts on translation studies to evaluate its validity. Given the experts' comments on the first draft of the questionnaire, some items were modified and revised in order to come up with a more valid version. Third, a pilot test of the questionnaire was administered among 15 EFL learners chosen from the same population in which the internal reliability of the Persian version of the questionnaire was found to have an alpha coefficient of 0.86. To collect the necessary data, the questionnaire was then distributed among the participants to complete it. After collecting the data, they were analyzed quantitatively. In doing so, the researcher calculated each participant's anxiety score by adding his or her ratings of the whole 16 items. Further, it should be noted that when the statements of the questionnaire were negatively worded, responses were reversed and then were computed. In this way, a high score in all likelihood represented high anxiety. The range of this scale was also from 16 to 80.

## 4. Results and Discussion

To answer the first two questions, the extent Iranian EFL learners perceive FL anxiety in the matched-gender and mixed-gender classrooms under investigation was determined and then the average mean scores of participants' responses to the questionnaire items were calculated within the range of the scale respectively. The results of quantitative data analysis are illustrated below:

**Table 1***Descriptive statistics of the participants' scores related to the matched-gender classrooms*

Classification of the questionnaire items	Number of items	Min	Max	Mean	SD
lack of confidence and communication comprehension	1,3,5,7,9,11,13,15	2	18	23	16
fear of making mistake and negative evaluation	2,4,6,8,10,12,14,16	2.3	21.5	25	19

**Table 2***Descriptive statistics of the participants' scores related to the mixed-gender classrooms*

Classification of the questionnaire items	Number of items	Min	Max	Mean	SD
lack of confidence and communication comprehension	1,3,5,7,9,11,13,15	1.9	31.5	34	26
fear of making mistake and negative evaluation	2,4,6,8,10,12,14,16	1.6	26.5	28	23

As shown in Table 1, the participants belonging to the matched-gender classrooms reported the overall mean score of 18 with a standard deviation of 2 for items measuring FL anxiety related to the lack of confidence and communication comprehension, and the overall mean score of 21.5 with a standard deviation of 2.3 for items measuring FL anxiety related to the fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation. However, on the other hand, as displayed in Table 2, the participants belonging to the mixed-gender classrooms reported the relatively higher overall mean score of 31.5 with a standard deviation of 1.9 for items measuring FL anxiety related to both types of classified questionnaire items, especially for the items assessing the lack of confidence and communication comprehension in language learners. In this respect, one possible explanation is that Iranian language learners are virtually subject to some gender-based influences exerted by the socio-cultural norms observed in the Iranian context. To compare the obtained results between the two types of classrooms to answer the third research question, the results are presented in the following:

**Table 3***Comparison of the matched-gender classrooms and the mixed-gender classrooms based on the overall means of participants' scores*

EFL classroom type	Mean	SD
Matched gender	39.5	4.3
Mixed gender	58	3.5

As can be seen in the above table, it seems that the learners belonging to the mixed-gender classrooms are significantly more likely to be affected by FL anxiety factors as compared with other learners belonging to the matched-gender classrooms. Thus, seemingly the results of the study indicate that mixed-gender classrooms might be considered as an anxiety-provoking teaching context in Iran, since the presence of the opposite gender was found to cause further language anxiety among Iranian learners studying English in EFL classrooms.

## 5. Conclusions

To sum up, the present study attempted to investigate the influence of matched-gender and mixed-gender EFL classrooms on Iranian learners' foreign language anxiety to shed more light on this affective variable in the Iranian context. After collecting and calculating the data, the results of the study yielded some noteworthy insights suggesting that the gender-based heterogeneity in EFL classrooms can produce notable FL anxiety among Iranian language learners which might eventually lead to some learning failures. The findings suggest that policy makers and ELT practitioners need to take into consideration the neglected role of affective pragmatic constraints such as the gender-based heterogeneity/homogeneity of classrooms while planning and implementing language curriculums in their local teaching contexts.

In fact, by tailoring context-specific affective challenges such as this to fulfill learners' needs and demands, more educational benefits might be derived from various EFL settings. As such, to offer some pedagogical

implications for Iranian EFL teachers, it is suggested that Iranian teachers pay sufficient attention to FL anxiety arousals caused by gender-based heterogeneity of their learners while teaching in the classroom. More specifically, Iranian teachers are suggested to support their learners more with positive feedbacks and avoid employing direct negative feedbacks while dealing with their learners in mixed-gender classrooms.

### 5.1 Limitations and suggestions for further research

Like all other studies, the present study, however, is not certainly without any limitations. One of the limitations is related to the small sample size which restricts the generalization of obtained findings. In other words, the results cannot be generalized to all Iranian EFL educational settings due to the fact that the participants were selected from two foreign language institutes 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. As some educational implications, the obtained findings suggest that the educational administrators, curriculum designers, and practitioners involved in the Iranian educational foreign language learning system, are required to pay more attention to the possible impact of the recognized gender-based discrepancies which might hinder the process of learning and teaching during different phases of planning, organization, and implementation. Seen in this way, the localized needs and beliefs of language learners are taken into consideration and teachers and learners may confront with fewer ecologically-oriented affective challenges in the given educational settings.

Further, it is suggested that some studies be planned to investigate the influence of this gender-related affective issue on EFL learners of other Asian Islamic and also Arab countries in which mixed-gender classrooms might likewise bring about significant amount of FL anxiety as well. In addition, as mentioned earlier, in terms of dealing with FL anxiety in the classroom, 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 deeper sense of understanding with respect to this affective variable.

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## Appendix

Statements (1) through (18) describe how you feel about English in language class. Please read the statements carefully and give your first reaction by choosing an answer for each statement: (1) strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree (4) Agree, or (5) Strongly Agree.

Personal information: Gender:  Male  Female Age: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my language class.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 2) I don't worry about making mistakes in my English class.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 3) In my language class, I get so nervous that I forget things I know.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 4) I feel embarrassed when I don't say English words correctly.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 5) In my language class, it embarrasses me to volunteer for answers I know.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 6) I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 7) I feel confident when I speak English in my language class.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 8) It frightens me when my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 9) I don't understand why some people get so upset over language classes.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 10) I get nervous when I cannot speak English correctly in my language class  
1 2 3 4 5
- 11) In my language class, I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 12) I don't volunteer answers in my language class because I am afraid of making mistakes.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 13) I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my language class.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 14) I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I make mistake.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 15) I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of my classmates.  
1 2 3 4 5
- 16) I don't get upset when I am corrected by the teacher in my language class.  
1 2 3 4 5

*Adapted and modified from Horwitz, et al. (1986)*

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