

## Foreign Language Anxiety and the EFL Learners' Intention to Continue their English Language Learning

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### Abstract

Anxiety undoubtedly plays an influential role in the experience of foreign language learning. This affective factor has attracted lots of researchers and has been the subject pool of scholarly research worldwide. However, research on the effect of demographic variables on foreign language anxiety (FLA) and the effect of FLA on the learners' intention to continue their English language education is still limited. Therefore, to bridge this gap, the present study intended to explore the role of gender and age in EFL learners' FLA level. In addition, the potential effect of learners' FLA in their decision whether to continue their English studies was tested. To this end, a sample of 295 university EFL learners completed FLA questionnaire and a demographic form. The findings showed that there was no significant correlation between the age of the learners and their FLA level. FLA differences with respect to gender did not reach the statistical significance either. However, it was found that FLA could significantly affect the learners' willingness to continue their English language education. The findings were discussed and implications were made.

**Keywords:** Foreign language anxiety; Gender; Age; Intention to continue English studies

### Introduction

Foreign language anxiety has been of interest to language educators for decades. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined FLA as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning. Further, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) described language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 28). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, p. 5) also defined foreign language anxiety “as the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient”.

In fact, research into the distinctive nature of FLA has found evidence for its negative effects on foreign language learning. In terms of cognition, anxious learners were found to have difficulty processing meaningful input, and to be less responsive to language output (Krashen, 1982). Anxiety has also been shown to have negative impacts on the three stages of cognitive processing: input, processing and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). With respect to achievement and performance, research has shown 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 (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Yan & Horwitz, 2008), between foreign language listening anxiety and listening course grades (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). For example, more anxious students in reading tend to recall less passage content, and experience more off-task, interfering thoughts than their less anxious counterparts (Sellers, 2000), while high-anxiety students in speaking produce longer texts and smaller amounts of continuous speech, have longer mid-clause pauses, make fewer repetitions, and make more false starts (Djigunovic, 2006). These results

indicate that FLA does have negative effects on foreign language learning performance and achievement.

In order to shed more light on the nature of foreign language anxiety in EFL context, Awan, Azher, Anwar and Naz (2010) employed FLCAS to examine FLL anxiety among 149 undergraduate learners. It was found that female students were less anxious in learning English as a foreign language than male students. Communication anxiety and English classroom environment were rated as the most serious causes of anxiety among in Pakistani EFL learners, respectively. Consistent with this finding, Arnaiz and Guillén's (2012) results indicated that anxiety among female students was higher than among their male counterparts.

Regarding age, Arnaiz and Guillén's (2012) findings showed that younger learners suffered more anxiety than older ones. They were more apprehensive towards communication, more anxious as regards evaluation and tended to feel less comfortable speaking English. On the contrary, Bailey, Onwuegbuzie and Daley's (2000) findings in a university context revealed that older learners tended to be more anxious than younger ones.

Nevertheless, research on foreign language anxiety in Iranian EFL context is still limited especially with respect to learners' intention to continue their studies and also demographic variables (e.g., age and gender). There are only a few studies reported. Atef-Vahid and Kashani (2011) explored EFL learning anxiety among 38 third-year high school students in English classrooms and its relationship with overall English achievement. The results showed that although some students felt extremely confident and relaxed, however, one-third of the students experienced moderate to high-anxiety levels while learning the English language in class. English classroom anxiety had the highest correlational value among other types of anxiety in FLCAS. Employing FLCAS and an open-ended structured questionnaire, Yamat and Bidabadi (2012) identified the level of anxiety among 63 randomly selected Iranian university freshmen in EFL classrooms along with the effect of gender on such an affective factor. The findings revealed that these university students experienced the anxiety of being evaluated negatively in EFL classrooms. The findings also demonstrated no statistically significant difference between male and female EFL learners' anxiety. Using FLCAS, Izadi and Atasheneh (2012) investigated the effects

of FLL anxiety on the communicative skills of listening and speaking of a sample of 30 Iranian EFL students. They found that anxiety is a matter which is directly related to the students' self-confidence and self-esteem.

In short, the present study aims at exploring the relationship between foreign language learners (FLL) and EFL learners' intention to continue their language learning. Further, differences in learners FLA level are examined considering age and gender. To this end, the following research questions are raised and addressed:

1. Is there any significant relationship between age and FLA?
2. Is there any significant difference in EFL learners' FLA with respect to gender?
3. Is there any significant FLA difference between those who intends to continue their language learning and those who do not like to continue?

## Method

### Participants

The participants included 295 non-English major undergraduate learners who were recruited using convenience sampling from almost all non-English disciplines offered at the University of Zabol. Their ages ranged from 18 to 31 years ( $M = 20.24$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ). One hundred forty four students were male (48.8 %), and 151 (51.2 %) were female. They were all taking General English as a compulsory university course prior to their ESP (English for specific purposes) courses.

### Instruments

Data collection was done through the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) and a demographic form. Persian version of the scale was prepared by translation and back translation in this study. Descriptive statistics and reliability estimates (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) are reported in Table 1.

#### *FLAS*

Language anxiety was measured through the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS, Horwitz et al., 1986). The scale is a 33-

item self-report instrument consisting of three subscales: communication apprehension (CA, 11 items, e.g., “*I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.*”), test anxiety (TA, 15 items, e.g., “*The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.*”) and fear of negative evaluation (FNE, 7 items, e.g., “*I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.*”). The participants indicated their answers on a five-point Likert scale varying from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The higher the scores on the CA, TA and FNE subscales, the more anxiety students suffer. In the current study, the Persian version of the scale was prepared through translation and back translation. When items were negatively worded, responses were reversed and recoded, so that, at any time, a high score indicated high anxiety. The reliability estimates (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) for CA, TA and FNE subscales were .87, .91, .86, respectively.

### ***The demographic Form***

The demographic form included questions on the participants’ age, gender, field of study and their intention to continue their English study in future.

### **Procedure**

Before the data collection, the researcher obtained consent from 6 related professors. Since they were all the researchers’ colleagues, they benefited from their warm cooperation and the volunteer participation of their EFL students as well. The questionnaires were administered in the classes within 2 weeks. The participants filled in the Persian version of the questionnaires in the classroom. Prior to distributing the questionnaires, the researchers explained the research objectives to the participants and informed them of the approximate amount of time needed for filling in the questionnaires (about 10 min). The students were assured that their participation would be voluntary and anonymous, and the potential results would be confidential and at no cost to their scholastic evaluation.

## Results

Pearson correlations were used to examine the relationships between FLA and the participants' age, and independent-samples t-test was also run to examine the participants' differences on FLA scores with respect to gender and intention to continue their English studies.

The results of Pearson correlation analyses indicated that the correlation between age and FLA did not reach the statistical significance neither for male learners ( $r = .06$ ,  $p > .05$ ) nor for females ( $-.12$ ,  $p > .05$ ) (see Tables 1&2).

*Table 1*  
Correlation between age and FLA among males ( $n = 144$ )

Variables	M/SD	Age	FLA
Age	20.21/2.09	-	.06 <sup>n</sup>
FLA	96.24/23.17		-

<sup>n</sup> Non-significant ( $p > .05$ )

*Table 2*  
Correlation between age and FLA among females ( $n = 151$ ).

Variables	M/SD	Age	FLA
Age	20.28/2.55	-	-.12 <sup>n</sup>
FLA	98.40/28.34		-

<sup>n</sup> Non-significant ( $p > .05$ )

The first t-test analysis also showed that there was no significant difference in learners' FLA regarding their gender (Table 3).

Table 3  
Descriptive statistics of male and female students on FLA

	Male (N=144)		Female (N=151)		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
FLA	96.24	23.17	98.40	28.34	1.65 <sup>n</sup>

<sup>n</sup> Non-significant (p > .05)

However, the second t-test analysis revealed ( t = 4.00, p < .001) that those who liked to continue their studies suffer less FLA in comparison with those who did not like to continue their studies (Table 4).

Table 4  
Descriptive statistics of EFL learners' their intention to continue their studies

Scales	Yes Continue		Not Continue		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
FLA	95.38	24.39	110.88	29.06	4.00**

\*\* p < .001

## Discussion

As stated before, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the potential differences in EFL learners' foreign language anxiety with respect to age, gender and their intention to continue their English studies.

The findings of the correlational analyses showed no significant correlation between age and FLA. Gender could not also make any difference in the learners' FLA. The only statistically significant finding was related to the learners' FLA difference considering their intention to continue or not to continue their studies. In other words, those who suffered more FLA were less likely to continue their studying English compared to those with lower level of FLA.

Regarding the relationship between age and FLA, the results of the current study are in contrast with those of previous research. Donovan and MacIntyre (2005), for instance, found higher language anxiety scores in French among Anglo-Canadian university students compared to high school and junior school pupils. Similarly, the results obtained in the work of Bailey, Daley, and Onwuegbuzie (2000) with college students enrolled in French, Spanish and German courses reveal that older students had higher

levels of input anxiety, processing anxiety, and output anxiety than did younger students; and also in a multilingual study by Dewaele (2007), younger participants tended to report lower levels of FLA when speaking the second and the third language. On the contrary, Dewaele et al. (2008) found that older adult multilinguals suffer less from foreign language anxiety than younger adults in their different languages.

As for the effect of foreign language anxiety on the EFL learners' intention to continue or not to continue their foreign language education, the findings of the current study are in line with those of Noels, Pelletier, Clément, Vallerand (2000) indicating that FLA could exert negative effect on L2 learners' intention to continue their L2 studies. These findings corroborate Phillips' (1992) argument that anxiety could have a negative impact on students' attitudes and motivation toward language study. According to Phillips (1992), although language anxiety apparently explains a small part of a very complex picture with regard to performance, its most significant contribution lies in its influence on the attitudes of students toward language learning and on their intentions to continue the study of a foreign language. Students who experience negative affect and who are frightened by oral evaluations are not likely to exhibit positive attitudes toward the language class, and they are not likely to take more than the required number of courses.

Foreign language learning is a challenging and anxiety-provoking experience for learners. It has been shown that almost one third of language learners experience mild to debilitating levels of foreign language anxiety (see Horwitz, Tallon, & Luo, 2009). Therefore, to lower their affective filters, anxious language learners should be helped to overcome their negative feelings and emotions. Teachers also need to cope with students' debilitating language anxiety, and also prevent students from shying away from class participation. It deserves to note that one of the dominant teaching methods around the world is communicative language teaching (CLT) which puts emphasis on authentic and unrehearsed language use and social interaction, provoking more language anxiety than any other teaching method. If teachers fail to cope with language anxiety effectively, by

ignoring various sources including gender and socio-cultural factors, success in CLT will be far from reaching its full potential.

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### **Biodata**

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