

## Investigating the Relationship between Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Language Anxiety and Their Reading Ability

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### Abstract

The present study examined the correlation between EFL learners' language anxiety and their reading ability. To this end, first, 200 intermediate-level EFL learners including 100 male and 100 female learners were selected from among the learners of a private language institute in Urmia as the participants based on their results on a proficiency test. Second, the participants received Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and completed it in about twenty-five minutes. Third, they took the researcher-made reading comprehension test of the study and answered its items in about forty minutes. The study was carried out in three sessions within a one-week period. Pearson Product Moment Correlation test was used for data analysis. The results of the study highlighted the fact that there were significant negative correlations between language anxiety and reading ability for both of the male and female EFL learners. It was argued that, the negative correlations between the participants' language anxiety and reading ability stemmed from: a) the debilitating role of anxiety in language learning; b) learners' lack of ability to recognize and adapt themselves to the cultural, social, and linguistic characteristics of the native speakers of the target language; c) the effect of formal evaluation on the learners' task performance; d) learners' underestimation of their capabilities to use the second language; and e) learners' inability to utilize efficient communication and group-based strategies in the context of the classroom.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, foreign language anxiety, learner differences, reading ability

### Introduction

There are multitudinous differences among second language learners over the course of second language acquisition (Ellis, 2008). These differences might stem from affective, cognitive, or social factors and may exert an influence on the language learners' rate of learning in the context of the classroom (Horwitz, 2000). Furthermore, these differences might influence the learners' ultimate level of achievement in the target language (Ellis, 2004). Among the aforementioned factors, cognitive and affective factors have received considerable attention in second language studies due largely to the fact that they have a noticeable influence on the learners' acquisition of the target language in academic contexts (Robinson, 2002).

Anxiety is one of the most significant affective factors which might modify the learners' acquisition of the various aspects of the target language (Horwitz, 2001). As Arnold and Brown

(1999) noted, anxiety refers to the feeling of discomfort which arises as a result of the pertinent situational contexts and hampers the process of learning. In other words, it encompasses “feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension or worry” (Scovel, 1978, p. 134).

Relevant research on this affective variable has highlighted the fact that, it may be *facilitative* in certain learning contexts. This type of anxiety might result in a manageable degree of tension which is associated with positive attitudes and has a euphoric and beneficial impact on the learners’ acquisition of the various aspects of the target language (Spielmann & Radnosfsky, 2001). Moreover, research has accentuated the detrimental role of *debilitative* anxiety in academic contexts. Oxford (1999) stated that, this kind of anxiety is harmful and impedes the process of second language acquisition. Finally, research has shown that, debilitative anxiety might influence the language learners’ performance of various language skills including reading comprehension.

Richards and Schmidt (2010) noted that, reading refers to the “processes by which the meaning of a written text is understood” (p. 483). These processes range from the silent scanning of the written material which is called *silent reading* to the apprehension of the semantic meaning of the material which constitutes *reading comprehension* (Brown, 2001). It is clear that the knowledge of the relationship between language anxiety and language performance plays a significant role in the field of second language acquisition and has to be investigated in diverse empirical studies (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

The review of the studies of anxiety shows that most of them have been conducted in second language learning contexts (e.g. Chastain, 1975; Horwitz, 1986; Zheng, 2008) and there are few studies in foreign language contexts. In addition, most of these studies have investigated the relationship between anxiety and general language proficiency (e.g. Burden, 2004; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) and have not examined its relationship with different aspects of language. The few studies which have been conducted in foreign language contexts including the EFL context of Iran have followed similar lines of research. To be more specific, they have either focused on productive language skills including speaking and writing (e.g. Akkakoson, 2016; Saeedi & Farina, 2017) or have dealt with other learner variables such as second language learning motivation (Tahernezhad, Behjat, & Kargar, 2014). Notwithstanding, there are not enough studies on the relationship between language learning anxiety and the receptive language skills including reading comprehension. It is clear that, there is a lack of research in this field and there is a need for more studies in foreign language contexts such as the Iranian EFL context.

The present study aimed to deal with the lack of research on language leaning anxiety in EFL contexts. Based on this aim, it made an effort to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian intermediate male EFL learners’ language learning anxiety and their reading ability?
2. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian intermediate female EFL learners’ language learning anxiety and their reading ability?

## Method

### Participants

On the basis of the aforementioned objectives, 200 intermediate-level EFL learners including 100 male and 100 female learners were selected from among the learners of a private language institute in Urmia as the participants of the present study. These participants were chosen according to their results on a proficiency test. They were native speakers of Azeri and ranged in age from 16 to 22. All of the selected participants had approximately 2 years of language studies in the appointed language institute.

### Assessments and Measures

The following instruments were utilized to carry out the present study:

#### *Proficiency Test*

In order to select the intermediate-level participants of the study, the researchers employed Fowler and Coe's (1976) *Nelson English Language Proficiency Test*. This test comprises 50 items in three parts including: *grammar*, *vocabulary*, and *reading comprehension*. As Fowler and Coe (1976) pointed out, the results of statistical analyses have revealed that this test has satisfactory reliability and validity indices and is an acceptable measure of language proficiency. Each of the items on this test was assigned 1 point. Consequently, the total score on this proficiency test was 50.

#### *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*

Based on the above-mentioned intents, the researchers employed Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS) to specify the participants' language learning anxiety. This questionnaire encompasses 33 items. The participants were required to rate each of these items on a 5-point Likert-scale which ranges from *strongly agree* (i.e. 5) to *strongly disagree* (i.e. 1). The developers of this questionnaire asserted that, higher scores on this questionnaire manifest a higher degree of language learning anxiety. Furthermore, as they noted, it has satisfactory reliability (.83) and validity (.87) indices and constitutes an acceptable instrument for the examination of second language learning anxiety in academic contexts.

#### *Reading Comprehension Test*

The researchers used a 20-item reading comprehension test in order to determine the participants' reading ability. All of the texts on this test were chosen from among the reading passages of the textbook entitled *Read This 1* (Mackey, 2010). This textbook was selected due to the fact that it contains appropriate reading passages for intermediate-level learners. The researchers carried out a pilot study prior to the main study in order to guarantee the reliability and validity of this researcher-made test. To this end, first, they selected 30 intermediate-level learners (i.e. 15 male & 15 female) who had similar characteristics to the participants of the present study from among the learners of the relevant language institute. Second, they administered the reading test to them and asked them to answer its items in sixty minutes. Third, they utilized Cronbach's alpha measure of internal consistency to determine the reliability of this test. Based on the results of analysis, the Cronbach's alpha reliability index of the test was (.84) which is regarded to be a satisfactory reliability index for researcher-made tests. Finally, they administered the reading section of Fowler and Coe's (1976) *Nelson English Language*

Proficiency Test to these learners and correlated their results on this test with their results on the researcher-made reading comprehension test to determine the concurrent validity of the test. Based on the results of the analysis the concurrent validity of the test was (.86) which is regarded to be satisfactory for researcher-made tests.

### **Procedure**

In the present study, first, 200 intermediate-level EFL learners including 100 male and 100 female learners were selected from among the learners of a private language institute in Urmia as the participants based on their results on Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (Fowler & Coe, 1976). Second, the participants received Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and completed it in about twenty-five minutes. Third, they took the researcher-made reading comprehension test of the study and answered its items in about forty minutes. The study was carried out in three sessions within a one-week period. Pearson Product Moment Correlation test was used for data analysis.

### **Design**

Creswell (2011) argued that quantitative approach to research makes an endeavor to determine specific trends or correlations among quantifiable variables by means of numerical data analysis. He explained that, correlational designs are among the main designs of quantitative approach and try to determine the degree and direction of the relationship between two variables. An examination of the data collection and analysis of the present study shows that it adopted the quantitative approach to research and collected numerical data by means of specific instruments. Moreover, it made an effort to determine the degree and direction of the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' foreign language anxiety and their reading comprehension ability. Consequently, it can be argued that, the present study was conducted based on a correlational design.

## **Results**

### **Data Analysis**

The first and the second research questions of the study made an effort to determine the relationships between Iranian intermediate male and female EFL learners' language learning anxiety and their reading ability respectively. In order to select the appropriate statistical test for data analysis the researchers examined the normality of data distribution. Table 1 and Table 2 provide these results for the male and female learners' performances on the relevant anxiety questionnaire and reading ability test of the study.

Table 1

*Tests of Normality for Male EFL Learners' Performances on Language Anxiety Questionnaire and Reading Ability Test*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Language Anxiety	.118	100	.212	.926	100	.489
Reading Ability	.134	100	.358	.956	100	.578

Table 2

*Tests of Normality for Female EFL Learners' Performances on Language Anxiety Questionnaire and Reading Ability Test*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Language Anxiety	.148	100	.372	.946	100	.579
Reading Ability	.113	100	.384	.948	100	.527

As shown in Table 1 and Table 2 all of the p-values in the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests (marked as Sig.) for the male and female learners' performances on the language anxiety questionnaire and the reading test of the study were more than the level of significance .05. Consequently, the data distribution of the study was normal and the researcher utilized the Pearson product-moment correlation test in order to analyze the collected data. The following part presents the results of data analysis for each of the relevant research questions:

**RQ1:** Is there a significant relationship between Iranian intermediate male EFL learners' language learning anxiety and their reading ability?

On the basis of the objective of this question, the researchers correlated the male EFL learners' performances on the relevant anxiety questionnaire and reading ability test. Table 3 provides these results:

Table 3

*Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between Male EFL Learners' Performances on the Language Anxiety Questionnaire and Reading Ability Test*

		Language Anxiety	Reading Ability
Language Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	-.844
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	100	100
Reading Ability	Pearson Correlation	-.844	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

As shown in Table 3, the p-value .000 in the result of the Pearson product-moment correlation (marked as Sig.) was less than the level of significance .05. Moreover, the negative sign in front of the correlation coefficient value indicated the negative correlation between the aforementioned variables. Consequently, the first null hypothesis was rejected. That is, it was argued that, there was a significant negative correlation between male EFL learners' language anxiety and their reading ability. Figure 1 shows these results:

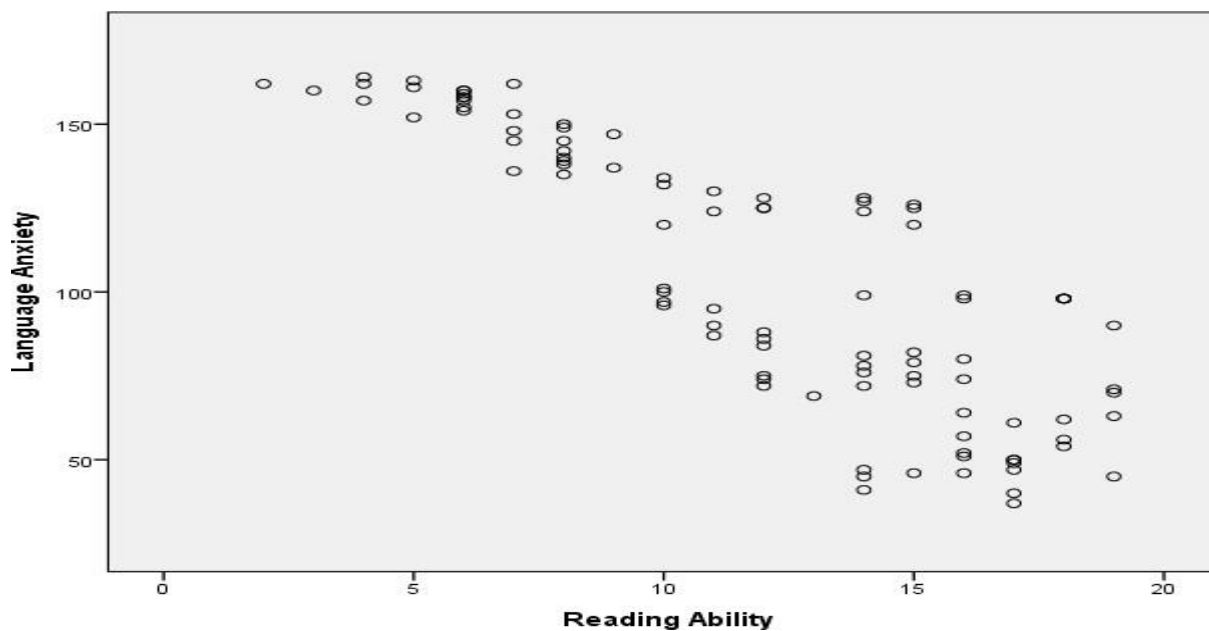


Figure 1. Correlation between Male EFL Learners' Language Anxiety and their Reading Ability

**RQ2:** Is there a significant relationship between Iranian intermediate female EFL learners' language learning anxiety and their reading ability?

Based on the aim of this question, the researchers correlated the female EFL learners' performances on the anxiety questionnaire and reading ability test of the study. Table 4 shows these results:

Table 4

*Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between Female EFL Learners' Performances on the Language Anxiety Questionnaire and Reading Ability Test*

		Language Anxiety	Reading Ability
Language Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	-.867
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	100	100
Reading Ability	Pearson Correlation	-.867	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

As shown in Table 4.44, the p-value .000 in the result of the Pearson product-moment correlation (marked as Sig.) was less than the level of significance .05. Moreover, the negative sign in front of the correlation coefficient value indicated the negative correlation between the aforementioned variables. Consequently, the second null hypothesis was rejected. That is, it was argued that, there was a significant negative correlation between female EFL learners' language anxiety and their reading ability. Figure 2 shows these results:

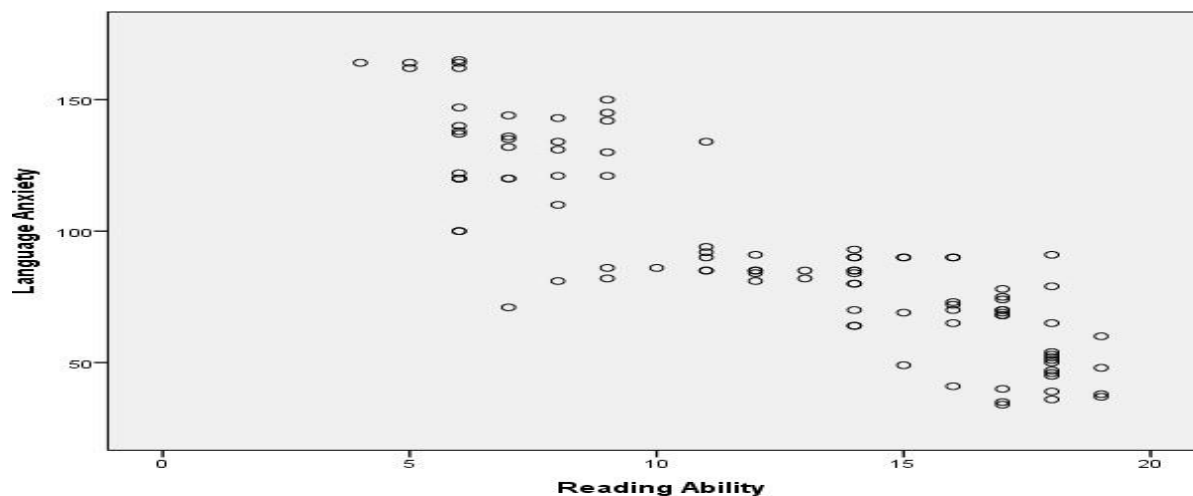


Figure 2. Correlation between Female EFL Learners' Language Anxiety and their Reading Ability

## Discussion

The first and the second research questions of the study examined the correlation between Iranian intermediate male and female EFL learners' language learning anxiety and their reading ability. The results of the study highlighted the fact that there were significant negative correlations between language anxiety and reading ability for both of these groups of learners. These results are in line with the results of the studies by Yousefi Azarfam and Baki (2012), Akbari and Sadeghi (2013), Tahernezhad, Behjat, and Kargar (2014), Amiri and Ghonsooly (2015), Akkakoson (2016), and Saeedi and Farina (2017).

Yousefi Azarfam and Baki (2012) examined the relationship between EFL learners' foreign language anxiety and their speaking performance. The results showed that, there was a significant negative relationship between these variables. Akbari and Sadeghi (2013) tried to specify the correlation between EFL learners' language learning anxiety and their classroom performance. Based on the results, the aforementioned variables had a negative correlation.

Tahernezhad, Behjat, and Kargar (2014) made an endeavor to determine the relationship between EFL learners' language anxiety and their second language learning motivation. The results highlighted the existence of a negative relationship between the relevant variables. Amiri and Ghonsooly (2015) conducted a study to examine the correlation between language learners' anxiety and their performance on classroom tests. The results accentuated the fact that the learners' anxiety had a negative correlation with their classroom test performance. Akkakoson (2016) made an effort to determine the relationship between EFL learners' language anxiety and their English speaking ability. The results of this study foregrounded the existence of a negative correlation between these variables. Finally, Saeedi and Farina (2017) examined the relationship between EFL learners' language anxiety and their writing performance. The results showed that, there was a significant negative relationship between these variables.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) stated that second language anxiety might hamper the process of language acquisition in the context of the classroom. As they explained, male and female learners' anxiety has a debilitating impact on the learning of the diverse aspects of the target language and is regarded to be one of the greatest impediments to interlanguage development. As they concluded, learners' anxiety might hamper their attempt to develop the various skills of the target language including the reading ability in academic settings.

Similarly, Spielmann and Radnosfsky (2001) contended that, language learning anxiety may have a detrimental effect on both male and female language learners' skill development in language classrooms. They explained that, a large number of the language learners might not be able to adapt themselves to the linguistic and cultural conventions of the target language. This issue results in the learners' anxiety in the use of the target language in diverse situational contexts including the second language classrooms and impedes their interlanguage and skill development.

Furthermore, Kitano (2001) pointed out that, academic assessment might discourage the male and female learners to develop second language skills in the context of the classroom. He argued that, learners' anxiety might stem from the various types formal and informal assessments which are carried out by the teachers or the learners' peers in language courses. According to him, the learners' assessment-based anxiety might impede their negotiation of meaning and authentic interaction with their peers and the instructor and may disrupt their second language skill development.

Moreover, Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, and Daley (2000) noted that, male and female learners' subjective evaluation of their language ability might lead to their language anxiety. They pointed out that, a number of language learners underestimate their ability to utilize the second language and experience anxiety as a result of the competitive atmosphere of the second language classrooms. As they concluded, the learners' anxiety might have a negative effect on their acquisition of diverse skills including the reading ability in language classrooms.

Finally, Levine (2003) noted that, male and female learners' lack of ability to utilize social and group-based communication skills might increase their language learning anxiety. He noted that, some of the learners are not able to build constructive relationships with their peers in various types of collaborative tasks and experience anxiety in the process of task performance. As he concluded, the learners' anxiety does not allow them to focus on various aspects and skills of the second language (e.g. reading ability) and hampers their skill acquisition.

Based on these issues, it can be argued that, in the present study, there were significant negative correlations between male and female EFL learners' language learning anxiety and their reading ability since: a) anxiety was a great impediment to the learners' interlanguage development and hampered their reading skill development; b) male and female learners were not able to adapt themselves to the linguistic and cultural conventions of the target language and did not make an effort to develop language skills including the reading ability; c) male and female learners experienced anxiety as a result of the formal reading comprehension assessment in the context of the classroom; d) the participants had a negative evaluation of their language proficiency which discouraged them from making an effort to develop the reading skill; e) the participants lacked the essential group-based communication skills and could not pay conscious attention to the various aspects and skills of the second language including the reading skill.

## Conclusion

The present study examined the correlation between EFL learners' language anxiety and their reading ability. The results of data analysis accentuated the fact that there were significant negative relationships between the aforementioned variables for the male and female EFL learners. It was argued that, the negative correlations between the participants' language anxiety and reading ability stemmed from: a) the debilitating role of anxiety in language learning; b) learners' lack of ability to recognize and adapt themselves to the cultural, social, and linguistic characteristics of the native speakers of the target language; c) the effect of formal evaluation on the learners' task performance; d) learners' underestimation of their capabilities to use the second language; and e) learners' inability to utilize efficient communication and group-based strategies in the context of the classroom.

Based on these results, it can be argued that, syllabus designers have to modify and revamp EFL materials in order to decrease the learners' language anxiety. For instance, they can design more interesting textbook covers with the help of cartoon strips and caricatures which might reduce the learners' anxiety. Moreover, they can include more absorbing and locally relevant reading comprehension texts which attract the learners' attention and enable them to relate the new materials and ideas to their background information. Furthermore, the EFL teachers are advised to exercise caution about the learners' anxiety in the context of the classroom. To be more specific, the teachers have to assess their learners' language anxiety at the beginning of the language courses by means of appropriate instruments including the language anxiety questionnaire of the present study. In addition, they have to make an effort to reduce the learners' anxiety by means of absorbing reading comprehension tasks. For instance, instructors can provide the learners with funny short stories in order to make them aware of the fact that reading comprehension can be both informative and enjoyable.

There is a need for more empirical studies in order to specify the role of second language anxiety in the process of language acquisition. The future studies have to deal with the limitations and delimitations of the present study. To be more specific, these studies have to include a larger number of participants and should select these participants from various age groups to deal with the role of age in the learners' language anxiety. Furthermore, they should make an effort to select the participants from diverse first language backgrounds in order to determine the effect of this learner factor on the amount of experienced anxiety. Moreover, the future studies have to include learners from different proficiency levels and should focus on the diverse skills and aspects of the target language. Finally, these studies should be conducted in diverse academic settings such as public schools and universities in order to determine the impact of anxiety on the learners' interlanguage development in both second and foreign language learning contexts.

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### Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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