

## Foreign Language Learning (FLL) Anxiety and the Coping Strategies: The Case of Iranian High School Students

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**Abstract:** *Foreign language learning (FLL) anxiety has been widely defined as a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry (Young 1991) associated specifically with the foreign language learning situations. This paper aims to report the results of a study conducted to identify a typology of the FLL anxiety in the Iranian context and among Iranian high school students who learn English as a foreign language, the sources of, and the strategies that students use to cope with the anxiety they experience in English language classrooms. Results revealed that students experienced four types of anxiety as identified in the literature namely, test anxiety, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and English class anxiety. It was also found that the sources were related to the learner, the teacher, the classmates, and the institution. The coping strategies were identified as preparation, positive thinking, relaxation, peer seeking, resignation, reliance on first language as a compensation strategy and religious beliefs as another coping strategy. Based on these findings, pedagogical implications related to FLL anxiety management are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Anxiety Types, Coping Strategies, FLL Anxiety, Iranian Students, Sources of Anxiety*

### Introduction

Learning English as a predominantly- used language all over the world has always been a burden and a challenging task for some learners as opposed to others who find it easy to undertake. This dichotomy has led the researchers and educators to investigate a wide range of variables that may result in such a problem. These include a wide range of areas from the neurological to psychological, cognitive, and affective domains with the latter encompassing empathy, self-esteem, inhibition, motivation, attitudes, and anxiety, particularly foreign language learning (FLL) anxiety, which has been the subject of many studies in this regard in a variety of contexts (Akbari & Sadeghi, 2013; Aydin & Zengin, 2008; Kondo & Ling, 2004; Mesri, 2012).

Two classical classifications of anxiety are Spielberger's categorization of anxiety as trait-state and facilitating-debilitating classification by Scovel (cited in Shabani, 2012). Trait anxiety is viewed as being stable over time, while state anxiety is a transient and moment-to-moment feeling. Ellis, (1994) adds another dimension to this two level dichotomy of anxiety as situation- specific and related to apprehension that is unique to specific situations and events.

FLL anxiety is considered as a situation-specific personality trait encompassing two psychological components which include emotional arousal and negative self-related cognition (MacIntyre 1995). These two components interfere with behaviour instrumental to language learning, and are more present in those who have a high level of language anxiety.

Language anxiety is consistently considered as a debilitating factor which is associated with problems in language learning such as problems in listening comprehension, reduced word production, impaired vocabulary learning, lower grades in language courses, and lower scores on standardized tests (Horwitz & Young in Kondo & Ling, 2004). Therefore, understanding the mechanism of anxiety in language learning has been of major concern to educators and researchers all over the globe (Akbari & Sadeghi, 2013; Aydin & Zengin, 2008; Lizuka, 2010; Kondo & Ling, 2004; MacIntyre & Gardner 1994; Mesri, 2012; Shabani, 2012).

There has been attempts to investigate FLL anxiety in the Iranian universities (Akbari & Sadeghi, 2013; Azarfam, 2012; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Mesri, 2012; Shabani, 2012), however, what has remained unexplored in this regard is investigating different types of anxiety, their sources and the coping strategies used by students in the Iranian high school which as the existing gap in the existing literature on FLL anxiety in Iranian context reveals need further attention and investigation. This paper is, thus, an attempt to tackle this issue and to further add to the pool of knowledge in this regard.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As mentioned earlier students studying English as a foreign language experience some sort of anxiety in their English class due to diverse factors. Some studies have already investigated this issue in Iran; however, most of them have been conducted in private institutes or at the university level using questionnaires with a 5- point Likert scale (ibid). To contribute to the previous research, in this regard, and to provide a better understanding of FLL anxiety in Iran and filling the existing gap, the present study aimed at looking deeply into the FLL anxiety of the Iranian high school students, its sources and the strategies used to cope with this anxiety. The following research questions were posed to address this issue:

- 1- When do the Iranian high school students experience anxiety in their English class?
- 2- What are their perceived sources of this anxiety?
- 3- What are their coping strategies in dealing with this anxiety?

## Review of the Related Literature

A comprehensive review of the related literature (Brown, 2007; MacIntyre, 1995; Howritz, Dorneyei in Lizuka, 2014) has indicated that firstly FLL anxiety is a unique form of anxiety that is prevalent in foreign language contexts and distinguished from anxiety experienced in other situations and secondly it has been indicated that it results in poor FL learning though some may consider it as facilitating (Lizuka, 2014). The conclusion seems warranted that a construct of anxiety which is not general but instead is specific to the language acquisition context is related to second language achievement. The results of a growing body of research have shown that there is a negative relationship between FL anxiety and the level of achievement (see Gardner in Khodaday & Khajavi, 2012; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Na, 2007; Phillips, 1992).

The results of the previous studies at international levels has identified the sources of foreign language anxiety as personal and impersonal anxieties, learners' beliefs and attitudes about/ toward learning a foreign language, teachers' beliefs about teaching a foreign language, classroom procedures and testing (Young, 1991). Level of language course, language skills, motivation, proficiency, teachers, tests, and culture, not being prepared for the lesson, fear of forgetting vocabulary and structures, fear of being laughed by other students, communication apprehension felt towards teacher, teacher's questions and corrections, fear of making pronunciation errors, and speaking in front of peers, fear of failing class and fear of leaving unfavourable impression on others and being negatively evaluated by others, have also been reported as other sources of FLL anxiety in the literature (Bailey, 1983; Ellis & Rathbone, 1987; Young, 1990; Price, 1991; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; Oxford, 1992 in Shabani, 2012; Kondo & Ling, 2004;).

Studies investigating FLL anxiety coping strategies have found a plethora of strategies for coping with language anxiety. Kondo and Ling (2004) collected information from 209 female and male learners studying English in two Japanese universities. All the respondents were required to answer an open-ended questionnaire and write down the specific strategies they used to deal with their foreign language anxiety. 70 strategies were identified which were narrowed down and grouped into five main categories including preparation which might include studying hard, trying to obtain good summaries of lecture notes; relaxation, for example, taking a deep breath, trying to calm down; positive thinking such as imagining oneself giving a great performance in front of the class, and trying to enjoy the tension; peer seeking that is looking for others who are having difficulty controlling their anxiety or asking other students if they understand the class, and last but not least resignation which can actualize in the form of giving up or sleeping in class.

Lizuka (2010) attempted to investigate learners' coping strategies for anxiety experienced in FLL contexts. He recruited 108 Japanese EFL college students enrolled in a content-based

English language program for the purpose of her study. The students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire in their first language. They were also asked to report on the situations that were perceived by them as anxiety-provoking. Results of Lizuka's study revealed that the students used relatively more positive strategies and fewer negative strategies in each of 11 anxiety provoking contexts. Anxiety provoking situations in Lizuka's study were categorized into four different groups namely: self-perception, anxiety related to Esc (the specific context in which the subjects were studying English and the requirements of the university), anxiety related to English communication, and general anxiety in English class. The strategies used by students to cope with these types of anxiety were identified as having positive attitudes through being well-prepared, or by making a greater effort, asking classmates for help when they failed to understand the teacher's explanations, and passive strategies such as giving up, ignoring, or distancing oneself from difficult situations, and using L1 which can be considered as both positive and negative.

At national level, Mesri (2012) attempted to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' FLL anxiety with regard to gender employing a questionnaire as her data collection tool. The participants, in her study, were 52 students studying English at Salmas University. The findings revealed that there existed a significant relationship between FLL anxiety and gender as females experienced more FLL anxiety. This is different to the results of the study by Shabani (2012) that indicated there was no significant difference between males and females in anxiety.

In a similar study, Akbari and Sadeghi (2013) administered Horwitz and Cope's (1986) questionnaire to a randomly selected sample of 191 Iranian bilingual Kurdish-Persian non-English-major undergraduate students at a technical college in Ilam, Iran. The findings of their study revealed that these bilinguals learning English as their third language experienced a relatively high level of FLL anxiety in the forms of communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and anxiety in the EFL classroom environment.

Studies conducted in Iranian context have mostly investigated students' FLL anxiety and its relationship with overall English achievement, the effects of FLL anxiety on the communicative skills of listening and speaking, the levels and sources of language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation using FLCAS (Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale) and their English achievement measured through students' final standardized English exam administered by the school (Azarfam & Baki, 2012; Izadi & Atasheneh 2012; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Marwan, 2007; Noori, 2013; Riasati, 2011; Shabani, 2012).

Overall, the results of such studies in Iranian context have demonstrated that language learning anxiety exerts a debilitating impact on students' language learning. However, what remains intact in Iran is investigating the high school students' FLL anxiety types, the sources of the strategies experienced by the students and the coping strategies as expressed through

answering questions in open- ended questionnaires. The results of the present study would be beneficial in guiding both the learners and the teachers to tackle the anxiety related issues and provide a less anxiety- provoking learning/ teaching context leading to improvements in foreign language learning. To contribute to the previous research in this regard and provide a better understanding of FLL anxiety among high school students in Iran, the current study was conducted with the aim of looking deeply into students' FLL anxiety types, the sources, and the strategies they employed to cope with such anxiety.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants in the present study were recruited from female Iranian high school students in Kermanshah. A total of 60 participants studying English as their school subject matter in a state girl school in Kermanshah, Western Iran took part in this study. Their age ranged from 15-16 and they were volunteered to provide the answer to questions posed in an open- ended questionnaire in Persian. The respondents were encouraged to report any type of anxiety they experienced, their perceived sources, and the strategies they used from junior high school onward. The purpose was to identify as many different types, sources, and strategies as possible. They were also allowed to request clarification on any issue they did not fully understand. They were reassured that their identity would remain unanimous.

### **Design and Instrument**

The present study had a qualitative design in which the data were collected through an open- ended questionnaire posing three questions in students' first language:

1. When do you experience anxiety in your English class?
2. What do you think are the sources/ reasons of your anxiety?
3. How do you cope with this anxiety?

The respondents were asked to provide full explanations to each question and include all types of anxieties they experienced in their English class, their perceived sources and the coping strategies taking into account those experienced before in the previous English classes.

### **Procedure**

The written answers by the respondents were subsequently read and reread by the researchers in order to come up with a list of FLL anxiety types, and all the strategies used by the students to cope with such anxieties. The possible sources of the anxiety types were also identified as reported by the students. This was done by coding the data as in qualitative studies and then narrowing down the identified codes to come up with the final.

## Results and Discussion

The present study was conducted with the purpose of finding out about different types of anxiety in Iranian high school students, the sources and the strategies employed by the students to cope with such anxiety types through using an open-ended questionnaire. Three questions were posed to tackle the issue. Each of which will be discussed in what follows.

### *When do you experience anxiety in the English class?*

Regarding the first question, the identified categories were a) Test Anxiety including anxiety in written/ oral exam, about test score/ results, not being sure about the right answer or insufficient time allocated to exam b) Communication Apprehension that may be experienced when the teacher speaks in English ,the students do not understand teacher's English explanations, students are asked to speak in English c) Fear of Negative Evaluation or fear of others doing better than them, being ridiculed by peers, or when the peers can speak/ understand English but the student cannot and d) English Class Anxiety that encompasses experiencing anxiety when doing the task/ activity , being asked to make sentences in English, to summarize the Reading section in English/ answer related questions.

These findings are in line with the previous studies that identify FLL anxiety as: Communication anxiety b) Fear of negative evaluation c) Test anxiety d) Anxiety in the English classroom including teacher and teaching styles (Akbari & Sadeghi, 2013; Lizuka, 2010; Kondo & Ling, 2004; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Shabani, 2012)

### *What do you think are the sources/ reasons of your anxiety?*

The three sources of foreign language anxiety were categorized into sources associated with the learner, the teacher and the institution. As examples of sources associated with learners, we can refer to the students' self report on their low language proficiency, problems with macro and micro-skills, low self-esteem, getting embarrassed, not studying hard/ not having enough time to study for the lesson, and not having learned the lesson. This is partly in line with the results of other studies such as Young (cited in Lucas., Miraflores, & Go, 2011) and Lizuka's (2010) findings which indicated that anxieties related to the learner which eventually cause anxiety include low self-esteem, self-perceived low level of ability. However, students' unpreparedness for the classroom/ not having learned the material were not reported in the mentioned studies.

Teacher related sources were reported by students as teacher's gender, teacher's strictness and not caring about the students' different language proficiency levels when asking questions, teacher's unfamiliarity with various teaching methods or his/ her insufficient knowledge of English, teacher's false assumption regarding students' familiarity with a particular structure/

language item. This finding is supportive of the findings of other studies such as (Aida, 1994; Palacios 1998; Samimy, 1994 in Lucas et al, 2011) which found lack of teacher's support, unsympathetic personality of the teacher and lack of time for personal attention as related to anxieties with the teacher. However, no reference was made to teacher's gender or his/ her familiarity with different teaching methods in the previous studies.

Furthermore, institutional anxiety can be traced to the list of classroom activities that the language learners perceive as anxiety-provoking. These included: speaking in front of the class, oral presentations and report; and writing sentences or paragraphs and classroom atmosphere on the other hand. Peer pressure emerged as another source which was reflected in students' feeling of competitiveness and comparing their performance to that of peers. The fear of being ridiculed by classmates was among the sources related to peers. Some students mentioned that they couldn't identify their anxiety with any source that is to say unknown sources were reported as being influential. No previous research reported on such sources of FLL anxiety.

### *How do you cope with this anxiety?*

The participants in the present study reported on using various strategies including Preparation : "studying in advance is one way to cope with this anxiety", " I think I need to practice harder and memorize more vocabulary", Relaxation: " I just take few deep breaths and try to relax", Positive Thinking: " I just tell myself that I can do it and this helps", Peer Seeking: " I ask my friends if I don't understand something", and Resignation: " I prefer not to take part in the discussions" or " I don't volunteer for answering the questions". These findings are according to the findings of studies such as Kondo and Ling (2004) and Lizuka( 2010). Two other strategies identified in the present study were, firstly, a Compensation Strategy that is relying on the first language to compensate for any insufficiency and stress in the English classroom: "I just speak in Farsi whenever I cannot express myself in English/answer questions or explain something and this reduces my stress" and secondly Religious Beliefs, trusting God, asking him for help and calmness, saying prayers and Salavat. Examples from students' answers are as follows: "I trust God and that is enough for me to feel calm", and "I say prayers or Salavat and then feel calm afterwards"

### **Conclusion**

To put it in a nutshell, the present study was an attempt to investigate various types of anxiety in foreign language classroom and to identify the sources and also the strategies employed by the students to cope with the anxiety they experience in FL settings and to shed more light on this affective variable in the Iranian context. To this end an open-ended questionnaire was used to allow the respondents express their feeling as freely possible without

being restricted by the constraints of the closed- ended questionnaires and deciding on predetermined answers on scales.

The qualitative analysis of the data demonstrated that students experienced four different types of anxiety namely, Test Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative Evaluation and English Classroom Anxiety. The sources of the anxieties experienced by students were identified and categorized into three known and one new source. These sources originated in the Learner, the Teacher, the Institution and last but not least the Peers. Students' coping strategies in the language classroom were characterized by the use of cognitive, affective, and behavioural strategies such as Preparation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking, Resignation, and relying on first language as a Compensation Strategy or appealing to Religious Beliefs and prayers to feel calm.

### **Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, some implications and suggestions are provided as follows. As Horwitz et al rightly argue (1986), educators have two options when dealing with anxious students: 1) they can help them to cope with the existing anxiety provoking situations; or 2) they can make the learning context less stressful through being supportive, understanding, or using less anxiety- provoking teaching methods, providing more encouragement and avoiding negative evaluation of learners in classrooms and giving positive reinforcement and feedbacks (Lucas et al., 2011; Mahmoodzadeh, 2013). Therefore, Iranian EFL teachers' awareness of FLL anxiety needs to be raised since FLL anxiety is an important factor which affects students' EFL learning process to a great extent (Lucas et al, 2011). What is implied here is that FLL anxiety can be reduced if the teacher is supportive and acknowledges his/ her students' anxiety and offers suggestions and coping strategies to tackle the issue.

Group work and evaluation may be utilized and general comments on their linguistic performance may be given instead of individual evaluation that eventually causes anxiety on the part of their learners. In this way, students not only maintain their face when making mistakes, but also divide the anxiety level down to the group and bear it as a whole rather than individually.

Much research indicates that adequate anxiety plays a positive role and can motivate students to maintain their efforts on learning the material. The teachers' real job, therefore, is to help students keep such adequate anxiety that is neither too high nor too low (Na, 2007; Mesri, 2012) because completely avoiding all these anxiety-provoking situations is neither practical nor helpful in the learning process. This is certainly an area by itself needing to be investigated thoroughly to see what the adequate level of anxiety is.

As the findings of the present study indicated, teacher's gender was considered as one of the sources of students' anxiety. It is needless to say that this leaves an area for more investigation by itself. There are other variables such as students' age, language proficiency, cultural background, interest and motivation that may have an impact on their anxiety level and need a closer look.

As one of the limitations of the present study, the results cannot be generalized to all Iranian EFL students due to the fact that the limited number of participants was selected from a girl school located in one of the educational districts of Kermanshah, Iran. Secondly, the instrument used in this study was an open-ended questionnaire posing three questions. No other instrument was used to collect the data. Other researchers are recommended to employ different instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, and observation to collect more in depth data and to recruit more subjects to take part in the study to make the results more generalizable and reliable.

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