



## The Impact of Stress and Bullying on the Academic Performance of Iraqi EFL Students

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### Abstract:

This study aimed to investigate the impact of stress and bullying levels on English language learning. A control-group design was adopted in this quasi-experimental pretest-posttest study. The population of this study were Iraqi EFL students from Om Albneen secondary school, from which a convenience sample of 70 students was chosen. The experimental and control groups were assigned at random to 50 and 20 students, respectively. The experimental group members completed a 100-minute bullying behavior session after completing the performance evaluation instrument (Sudoku puzzle) as a pretest. Participants were instructed to complete a parallel Sudoku puzzle and the Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale (LASRS) at the end of the session (2009). As shown in the study's findings, short-term bullying behavior had a favorable effect on English language learning ( $p < 0.05$ ). There was no significant difference between students with different degrees of stress, demonstrating that stress has no effect on bullying behavior's effect on English language learning ( $p > 0.05$ ). In general, the findings demonstrated that bullying conduct has a favorable impact on students' learning achievement. This study's findings can be applied in both educational and occupational settings.

**Keywords:** Stress, bullying, performance, EFL Students

تأثير التوتر والتوتر على الأداء الأكاديمي لطلاب العراقيين من  
متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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### الخلاصة

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة آثار سلوك التتمر ومستويات التوتر على تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. تم استخدام تصميم مجموعة ضابطة شبه تجريبية قبل الاختبار البعدي. يتألف المجتمع من طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مدرسة أم البنين الثانوية حيث تم اختيار عينة من ٧٠ طالبًا باستخدام طريقة أخذ العينات الملائمة. تم توزيع ٥٠ و ٢٠ طالبًا بشكل عشوائي على المجموعتين التجريبية والضابطة على التوالي. بعد الانتهاء من أداة تقييم الأداء (أحجية سودوكو) كاختبار أولي ، خضع أعضاء المجموعة التجريبية لجلسة سلوك تتمر لمدة ١٠٠ دقيقة. في نهاية الجلسة ، طُلب من المشاركين إكمال أحجية Sudoku الموازية ومقياس Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale ((LASRS (٢٠٠٩) ، وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن سلوك التتمر قصير المدى له تأثير إيجابي على اللغة الإنجليزية التعلم (ف > ٠,٠٥). لم يتم العثور على فرق كبير بين الطلاب الذين يعانون من مستويات مختلفة من التوتر ، مما يشير إلى أن التوتر لا يلعب أي دور في تأثير سلوك التتمر على تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية (p < ٠,٠٥). بشكل عام ، أظهرت النتائج الأثر الإيجابي لسلوك التتمر على الأداء الأكاديمي للطلاب. يمكن استخدام البصيرة من هذه الدراسة في الأوساط التعليمية والمهنية. الكلمات المفتاحية: إجهاد ، تتمر ، أداء ، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

### 1. Introduction:

EFL students are increasingly confronted with a variety of complex elements determining their effectiveness in language learning. Bullying conduct, above all, has a considerable impact on organizational performance. Students' performance as a competitive advantage leads to increased production and profitability, which are essential for any company's survival (Clark & Gieve :2006). Organizations require efficient human resources as an irreplaceable capital to increase profitability. As a result, firms must take steps to improve employee performance, such as improving staff morale and providing a favorable work environment (Anis, et al,2011).



Many factors can effect on a student's performance, including unproductive workplace conduct (CWB). According to Bennett , et al (2018) , CWB refers to a range of behaviors that hurt employees or organizations. Aggression, deviance, retribution, and revenge are examples of such behaviors. The most crucial is aggression, which includes behaviors like workplace incivility, violence, and bullying, according to Lyubykh ,et al(2021).

## 2.Review of the Literature

Bullying behavior studies has sparked a surge of interest (De Dreu & Gross :2019). Bullying is an aggressive behavior characterized by a power imbalance in which a person or a group of people purposefully and persistently attack, beat, or demonstrate anger toward others they perceive to be weaker than themselves (House:2021). Despite the fact that the idea of bullying behavior has been studied for more than 20 years, there is no agreement on how to define it. Bullying is defined as the deliberate and persistent damage of others as a result of an existing power imbalance between bullies and victims. Bullying conduct is considered as an abuse of authority by Muluk,et al,(2001and Rigby (2002). Bullying behavior in a school setting is defined by Salin , et al (2018) as inflicting harm on someone repeatedly and over time, during which a victim may be exposed to compulsion, intimidation, and humiliation. Physical harm or verbal abuse, such as insulting, shaming, spreading rumors, or purposeful expulsion from a group, are all examples of bullying conduct (D'Cruz, et al., 2018). Negative behavior can take many forms, including mental, physical, and sexual.

Bullying behavior in the workplace might include specific activities, interactions, or processes that are repeated over time and as a result of a power imbalance between individuals (Caponecchia ,et al: 2020). For Gori , et al, (2021), Bullying behavior is defined as "repeated acts of aggression." Steps taken against one or more employees who do not want to engage in such behavior Such acts may be intentional or unintentional, but they generate embarrassment, offence, and distress, as well as obstruct job performance and create an uncomfortable work atmosphere (Karatuna ,et al,2020).



Bullying usually consists of verbal abuse, with physical contact being uncommon. Nocentini, et al (2019) proposed a categorization comprising five forms of bullying behavior: (1) threat to professional status (including belittling opinions, public professional humiliation, and accusations of lack of effort), (2) threat to personal standing (including name-calling, insulting, intimidation, and devaluing with regard to age), (3) isolation (including preventing access to opportunities, physical or social isolation, and withholding information), and (4) overwork (including working under duress, setting impossible deadlines, and making unreasonable demands) (including, failure to give credit when due, allocation of meaningless tasks, removal of responsibility, repeated reminders of blunders, and setting the target up to fail). According to a 2008 study by the Workplace Bullying Institute, the following are the most common workplace bullying tactics: falsely accusing someone of "errors" that were not made (71%), staring and nonverbally intimidating (68%), unjustly discounting the person's thoughts or feelings in meetings (64%), ignoring satisfactory or exemplary quality of completed work despite evidence (58%), harshly and constantly criticizing and setting different standards for the target (57%), spreading damaging rumors about the target (56%). (Muluk, et al:2021).

### 3. Bullying has several causes.

There have been numerous attempts to determine the causes of bullying. While some researchers believe that bullies' and victims' personalities have a role in bullying, others argue that environmental factors are more important. Nonetheless, many academics have claimed that workplace bullying and other violent behaviors are the consequence of a combination of individual and environmental factors, meaning that both bullies' and victims' personality traits, as well as environmental circumstances, play a role in bullying behavior. Environmental factors are thought to play a significant role in the development of bullying behavior. Many academics believe that the external environment is the most important component in causing bullying behavior, and that personality attributes of bullies and victims are unimportant. In other words, bullies' and victims' personality qualities are considered as facilitating elements. Bullying is defined as a complex interactive and escalating process





in which the work environment and organization, as well as personality features of bullies and victims, and basic aspects of human interaction in the workplace, all play essential roles in workplace bullying (Setyono & Widodo,2019; VALENSIA et al,2021).

Workplace bullying has a negative impact on employees' personal, psychological, cognitive, and physiological performance (VALENSIA et al,2021), interpersonal communication and family relationships (Muluk ,et al:2021), professional performance, job satisfaction, job stability, and organizational citizenship behavior (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), and organizational productivity, reputation, and stability (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), as well as organizational productivity, reputation, and stability (Muluk,et al,2001). Bullying conduct, in general, has negative consequences for bullying victims, bystanders, and the organization (Setyono & Widodo,2019).

Workplace harassment stems from the belief that in an industrial society, employees who are subjected to aggressiveness or harassment will perform better(Salin,2018). Managers aim to achieve acceptable productivity and performance in this manner (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). Bullying, on the other hand, is a conspiracy-related conduct that, in most cases, results in a drop in victim performance (Lyubykh,2021). The importance of the subject and the different aspects involved are highlighted by the contradictory conclusions about the consequences of bullying behavior on performance.

Bullying and its consequences, including performance, have been found to be influenced by stress (McGrath, 2001). Stress is created by a person's reaction to a dangerous situation that restricts their ability to cope (Agha, 2021). Such a dangerous occurrence can have a significant impact on an individual's overall physical security, as well as their self-esteem, reputation, and mental well-being (Raith,et al,2021). Muluk,et al,(2001) proposed the following stress coping strategies:

Detached coping strategy: It is employed unconsciously to cope with stress rather than the source of stress.



**Avoidant coping strategy:** It is used to instinctively avoid the cause of stress, such as avoiding stressful event thoughts or denying its existence in practice.

**Cognitive coping strategy:** It is utilized for problem solving and deliberately coping with the source of stress.

**Emotional coping strategy:** It is impacted mostly by various emotional states. A problem-focused coping approach focuses on the source of stress, strives to identify the problem in a systematic manner, and incorporates many perspectives or solutions to the problem (Gori,2021)

The physiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects of stress can be categorized into four categories. Adrenaline and noradrenaline secretion, gastrointestinal dysfunction, an increase in heart rate, respiratory difficulty, and vasoconstriction are some of the physiological symptoms. Reduced concentration and attention, a loss in short-term memory, and an increase in agitation and absent-mindedness are all cognitive impacts. For Rauff & van der Meulen (2021), anxiety and despair, as well as increased physical and psychological tensions, are among the negative effects. Additionally, behavioral impacts include an increase in activity avoidance, sleep disruption, and academic, vocational, and social performance degradation.

One of the research hypotheses in this study is that students with higher levels of stress perform worse academically when confronted with bullying behavior as a stressful event. Given the detrimental effects of bullying on workplace and academic performance, this study will seek to investigate the impact of bullying on English language acquisition by replicating a work environment in the classroom. The simulation method aids in comprehending the dynamics of the industrial and academic setting. It allows students to mimic the problem in a safe environment where making mistakes has no repercussions and repeated attempts at solving the problem have no cost. Learning, according to Jassim (2020), occurs as a result of performance and practice.

Many academics believe that students can improve their performance in real-world job contexts by learning in an experimental environment that



focuses on professional learning (e.g., Salin , et al (2018). Students will be well-prepared for real-world problem solving as a result of this approach, in which they will need to integrate their knowledge, skills, personal attitudes, and relevant resources (Gregory ,2021).

Students can conceive and test ideas, model their own and others' behavioral patterns, make judgments, and see the results by replicating a work environment in the classroom in an academic setting, which can take weeks in a real-world work context (Muluk,et al,2001). Furthermore, students can gain valuable industry experience in the classroom without taking any risks or incurring any fees (Price, 1991, as cited in Salin , et al (2018)).

This study aims to investigate the impact of bullying behavior among students, as the role of bullying behavior has been practically ignored in the academic environment. Students are an important class in society since they will be experts in many scientific, technical, or artistic sectors and will play a role in future country government.

When compared to other kids, bullied students are more worried, cautious, and insecure. Bullied people are not aggressive, but they have a low self-esteem. Students appear to become antagonistic anytime they are in class or at school, and they are constantly frightened by the teacher. Bullied students are always depressed and frequently scream for aid (House (2021) ). Bullied students have poorer self-esteem and are more depressed (as cited in Fitch, 2021, p.43). Bullied children in our country are more sensitive, unhappy, cautious, apprehensive, silent, and have been physically or verbally assaulted in secondary school. According to Rigby (2002), many bullied pupils drop out of school due to their fear of bully teachers (as cited in Fitch, 2021, p.48). For example, kids who are afraid to ask any questions remain mute, and in one instance, they feel upset and drop out of school. High levels of school bullying are also linked to a lack of adequate monitoring in schools. Bullying happens when there is little or no supervision, such as in or out of class, according to Jassim(2021)

In terms of the function of environmental stress in the effect of bullying behavior on student academic performance, this study seeks to answer the



question of whether there is a difference in the effect of bullying behavior on English language acquisition depending on different levels of stress. As a result, the following are two research hypotheses:

- Bullying has an impact on students' academic achievement.
- Based on stress levels, there is a considerable difference in the influence of bullying behavior on English language learning.

#### 4.Method:

For the modeling of a workplace in an academic setting, three management experts approved the use of the two-way kappa analysis method. The findings are shown in Table 1 below.

Variable	Comparison	Kappa Coefficient
Agreement on the similarity of learning environment to workplace	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> management experts	70%
	1 <sup>st</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> management experts	82%
	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> management experts	67%

**Table 1** shows the results of a two-way Kappa analysis for a workplace simulation in an academic setting.

The Kappa coefficients in Table 1 are in the good to excellent range. In terms of purpose, this study is used, and the method is a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control-grouped design. This study looked at the impact of the independent variable (bullying conduct) on the dependent variable (student academic achievement). Table 2 below depicts the research methodology.

Number	Group	Random	Random	Pretest	Independent	Posttest





		Selectio n	Assignm ent		Variable	
1	Experime ntal	*	R	T1	X	T2
2	Control	*	R	T1	-	T2

Table 2 shows the research methodology.

The statistics population included Iraqi EFL students enrolled in the 2021-2022 academic year. The convenience sampling approach was used to pick a sample of 100 students, and ultimately 70 students took part in the study. The experimental and control groups were assigned at random to 50 and 20 students, respectively. The experimental group members completed a 90-minute bullying behavior session after completing the performance evaluation tool (Sudoku puzzle) as a pretest. The participants were then instructed to complete a Sudoku puzzle and the LASRS at the same time. During this time, the control group did not receive any treatment.

#### **4.1 Instruments for Data Collection:**

The LASRS and an easy level Sudoku puzzle were utilized to assess student performance. These are covered in greater depth further down.

#### **LASRS (Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale):**

The Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale (LASRS) was used to assess students' stress levels. The Lakaev Academic Stress Response Scale (LASRS) is a self-administered scale that measures students' physiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to academic stress. It was developed by D'Cruz & Lutgen-Sandvik (2018). The anchors are None of the Time (1), A Little of the Time (2), Some of the Time (3), Most of the Time (4), and All of the Time (5) on a 5-point Likert scale (5). The prototype scale had 27 items, but using exploratory factor analysis, the four stress response subscales – physiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral – were reduced to 24 items. The scale's Cronbach's alpha was reported to be 0.894. The physiological,



cognitive, affective, and behavioral subscales had internal consistency of 0.271, 0.180, 0.451, and 0.317, respectively (Karatuna& Muhonen ,2020).

#### 4.2 Procedure:

All participants of this study were women. In both groups, they completed the performance evaluation instrument (Sudoku puzzle) as the pretest after being randomly allocated to the experimental and control groups. After that, the members of the experimental group participated in a 100-minute bullying behavior session. The control group, on the other hand, received no help. Then, as a posttest, both groups were asked to complete the parallel Sudoku puzzle and the LASRS. Verbal and nonverbal intimidation, sarcastic or annoying jokes, interruption of speech, insulting, treating others as if they are ignored, negative nonverbal behaviors (including contemptuous looks, frowning, or showing a disapproving expression in response to others' opinions), sarcastic comments, ambiguous answers to questions, actions leading to impaired ability to perform tasks. The researcher used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The mean and standard deviation were used in the descriptive statistics. The covariance analysis was not employed in inferential statistics because the normality assumption was not met, hence the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used instead.

#### 5.Results:

According to the findings, 70.4 percent of the sample was assigned to the experimental group, while 29.6 percent was assigned to the control group. 70.4 percent of the experimental group had never solved a Sudoku puzzle before, while 29.6 percent had. Only 3.4 percent of the control group had such prior experience, whereas 96.6 percent had not. In the posttest stage, Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of the scores related to stress and academic performance for members of the experimental and control groups. According to the table, the control group's stress and academic performance are lower than the experimental group's.



Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variables for Control and Experimental Groups

Variable	Research Group	Statistics	
		Mean	Standard Deviation
Stress	Experimental	50.25	9.32
	Control	40.10	13.51
Academic Performance	Experimental	-6.75	33.02
	Control	-10.30	17.00

The Levene test found that the scores related to academic achievement were identical in variance at both the pretest and posttest stages ( $p > 0.05$ ). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, however, revealed that the normality of the academic performance scores in the control and experimental groups was not met ( $p < 0.05$ ). The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was employed instead of the covariance analysis because the covariance analysis was not possible. Table 4 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney U test for hypothesis testing.

Variable	Stress Level	Mean	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Significance Level
Academic Performance	Low	-6.506	28.61	1661.00	196.05	112.03	-0.401	0.405
	High	-11.04	24.60	213.03				

Table 4 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney U Test used to compare the experimental and control groups' academic performance at the posttest stage.



Table 4 shows that at the posttest stage, there is a significant difference in variable academic performance between the two groups ( $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, the experimental group that was subjected to bullying performed better than the control group. As a result, Hypothesis 1 was accepted. The Mann-Whitney U test findings for the examination of hypothesis 2 are presented in Table 5.

Variable	Stress Level	Mean	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Significance Level
Academic Performance	Low	6.307	29.60	1571.00	186.00	112.04	-0.601	0.425
	High	11.04	30.60	233.00				

Table 5 shows the Mann-Whitney U Test results for analyzing differences in academic performance between the experimental and control groups based on stress levels.

Table 5 shows that there is no significant difference in the experimental group's variable academic performance at the posttest stage ( $p > 0.05$ ). As a result, Hypothesis 2 was ruled out.

## 6. Conclusion and Discussion:

The purpose of this study was to see how bullying behavior and stress levels affected Iraqi EFL students' academic performance. Bullying behavior appears to help students enhance their academic performance, according to the studies. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study has ever looked at the impact of bullying on English language learning based on stress levels,



highlighting the study's uniqueness. This result that bullying conduct improves academic achievement is supported by the fact that, while being seen as a bad construct by many researchers, bullying behavior can have positive implications in the short term. In other words, a negative unpleasant work environment caused by bullying behavior contributes to a decline in morality, a lack of employee motivation and concentration, and the loss of quality products/services, and in such an environment, employees who are bullied are preoccupied with defending themselves rather than considering performance improvement and innovation. As a result, skilled individuals who can contribute significantly to the success of their firm would suffer as a result of such an environment. Because they are afraid of being bullied, such people avoid taking on duties, are unwilling to overwork and perform voluntary tasks, and may even consider retribution. Individuals may be tempted to retire early in such an environment, which would have a detrimental impact on the organization's production. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrated that intimidation as a bullying behavior had an immediate positive influence on employee performance; according to the literature, victims first strive to overcome bullying conduct, then try to be more devoted to their firm by working harder. However, as a result of mental exhaustion, lack of attention, and alertness, they will make more mistakes, lead to a drop in product/service quality, and involve the wrath and hopelessness of their coworkers. In other words, bullying victims prefer to avoid bullying conduct in the near term, demonstrating devotion to bullies and improving their performance as a result. Other reasons can be used to support this conclusion. According to Gori, et al(2021) not only victims of bullying are affected, but also spectators of bullying who compare their own behaviors to those of victims and strive to avoid bullying behavior. As a result, it may be inferred that charismatic executives can use strategic bullying to target low-performing staff and therefore enhance their performance. As a result of the bullying, such employees would endeavor to enhance their performance. However, it should be highlighted that long-term bullying conduct will drive such personnel to leave the firm, necessitating effective monitoring.





Such conclusions are also true for the academic environment and students, according to the literature. To improve their pupils' academic performance, some university teachers may resort to bullying tactics such as intimidation. They may sometimes use strategic bullying to target those low-performing kids so that those who witness the bullying might escape it by increasing their performance. Again, such tactics may be beneficial in the short term, but they have long-term implications such as a loss of student motivation, a drop in academic performance, academic failure, or university dropout. Because the experimental group members were only exposed to bullying conduct for one session and for a brief period of time, their better academic achievement can be explained.

The study's findings also revealed that, at the posttest stage, there was no significant difference in academic performance of the experimental group based on the two low and high stress levels. That is, stress had no bearing on the impact of bullying on kids' academic performance. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study has been undertaken on the role of stress in the effect of bullying behavior on academic achievement to allow for comparisons, suggesting the research's uniqueness.

This finding is supported by the fact that stress has a considerable impact on performance, and the impact of this construct is dependent on an individual's motivation level. In this vein, Salin , et al (2018) suggested that an optimal degree of stress can boost performance, whereas stress that lasts for extended periods of time or is intensified can have the reverse effect. High stress levels are one of the detrimental consequences of bullying behavior. It was believed that bullying would result in high stress levels, but the results revealed no differences in academic performance depending on stress levels. That is, regardless of stress levels, short-term adoption of bullying conduct would boost academic performance. This finding is supported by the fact that, as expected, students with low or high stress levels adopted the effective problem-focused coping approach when confronted with bullying behavior. Other ineffective stress coping mechanisms, such as emotional or avoidant coping strategies, may have resulted in consequences other than higher performance if the students had utilized them. As a result, the adoption of



additional ineffective coping techniques would appear to have long-term negative impacts on performance, necessitating further research.

Given the importance of human resources, the university is one of the most essential institutions in terms of preparing the future workforce. In the literature, there has been an increasing interest in the quality of connections between university instructors and students. The current study tried to imitate the workplace in a classroom in an academic atmosphere in order to prepare students to deal with workplace problems in the future and to investigate the influence of bullying behavior on students' academic performance. Students can conceive and test theories, replicate their own and others' behavioral patterns, make decisions, and witness the effects in a virtual setting, which can take weeks in a real-world work context (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Furthermore, individuals can gain valuable workplace experience in the classroom without taking any risks or incurring any fees (Jassim, 2020).

When generalizing the findings, it's important to keep in mind the study's limitations. All of the participants volunteered. They were chosen from a single university, Baghdad University. As a result, the findings should be applied with caution to other similar samples. Other studies in other cities should be undertaken to provide a baseline for comparison. Because the study used a quasi-experimental methodology, adopting bullying behavior for the experimental group was limited. To overcome these restrictions, some benefits can be explored for persons who participate in such research investigations. To summarize, understanding the impact of bullying behavior on student academic performance, identifying the factors influencing the interplay of bullying behavior and performance, creating the proper conditions for performance improvement, and providing training to students in this area are all important steps to take.

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ISSN 2306-5249

العدد الخامس

٢٠٢٢م / ١٤٤٣هـ



مجلة العلوم الأساسية  
للعلوم التربوية والنفسية وطرائق التدريس للعلوم الأساسية