Iraqi EFL Learners' Perspectives on Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract

The study was designed to determine the Iraqi EFL learner' perceptions on Foreign Language Anxiety and to investigate the learners' perceptions according to gender and level of English proficiency . A total of 120 students College during the academic year 2020 / 2021 participated in this study. The collected data was analyzed using means and standard deviation to identify level of overall Foreign Language Anxiety according to learners' perceptions. The (*T*-test) was used to examine a significant difference between (male and female) and (high level and low level of English proficiency) Learners on their perceptions toward Foreign Language Anxiety. The results showed that the level of Foreign Language Anxiety of EFL learners in Iraqi college were Medium overall. Also, the result showed that male learners presented less frequently in using overall Foreign Language Anxiety than did female learners and high level of English proficiency learners presented less frequently in using overall Foreign Language Anxiety than did low level of English proficiency learners. In the light of the results of the study, conclusions and educational implications of the anxiety are indicated

Key Words: Foreign Language Anxiety, learners' perceptions, gender, and English proficiency

1. Introduction

Language anxiety has been a major topic in second/foreign language study during the last two decades. A few research on anxiety in second and foreign language acquisition have been published in the last year. Learners of both foreign and second languages experience language anxiety, which can cause issues "because it might interfere with the learning, retention, and output of the new language" (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991, p. 86).Furthermore, Elkhafaifi (2005, p. 216) stated that severe language anxiety can lead to other issues such as low self-esteem, self-confidence, and risk-taking capacity, which might impede competency in the language. Because it is particular to learning and speaking in a foreign language, language anxiety is distinct from general anxiety and other kinds of anxiety. Language anxiety, according to Chen and Zhang (2004), is a distinct type of anxiety caused by something specific in the language acquisition processes that makes certain people uneasy or worried.

According to MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) defined foreign language anxiety as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (p. 283). There are three "affective filter variables" plays a vital role in second language acquisition such as a) motivation, b) self-confidence and c) anxiety. To succeed in second /foreign language achievement, the learners should be motivated, high level of self-confidence and lower level of anxiety.

1.1. The Problem and its Significance

Language anxiety may be viewed as a manifestation of other forms of anxiety, such as exam anxiety or public-speaking anxiety. According to Daly (1991,p.10), the fear of speaking in public outnumbers other phobias such as snakes and heights. As a result, any research into speaking in a foreign language class should assess how much anxiety is caused by a fear of speaking in general vs how much anxiety is caused by a fear of speaking in the foreign language (Young, 1991, p.230).

Foreign language learners experience a lot of worry when it comes to learning a new language. According to Worde (1998, p.7), one-third to half of the students surveyed said they had debilitating language anxiety. This means that communicating in a foreign language, such as English, is regarded as a stressful circumstance. Learning English as a foreign language has always been a difficult task for Iraqi students due to limited interaction with target-language speakers and a dearth of exchange opportunities, particularly with English-speaking nations. Students majoring in English may not have many opportunities to practice or interact in English outside of the classroom, and they are more likely to converse in Arabic. When students are obliged to speak in a foreign language, these scenarios are likely to cause anxiety, which will hinder the learning process and their willingness to communicate in the target language. Determine the perspectives of Iraqi EFL students on foreign languages. Teachers benefit from anxiety in terms of recognizing individual variances in foreign language acquisition and knowing that speaking a foreign language causes the most anxiety for many pupils (Elkhafaifi, 2005, p.211).Furthermore, understanding the amount of anxiety among students and attempting to assist them might assist teachers in becoming less worried and creating an emotionally pleasant and supportive environment.

1.2. Aims of the Study

The aims of this study are:

1. To identify the Iraqi EFL learner' perceptions on Foreign Language Anxiety.
2. To investigate the learners' perceptions toward Foreign Language Anxiety according to gender
3. To investigate the learners' perceptions toward Foreign Language Anxiety according to level of English proficiency.

1.3. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the most frequent level of overall Foreign Language Anxiety Foreign Language Anxiety according to Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions?
2. Is there a significant difference in learners' perceptions toward Foreign Language Anxiety due to gender?
3. Is there a significant difference in learners' perceptions toward Foreign Language Anxiety due

to level of proficiency?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Spielberg (1983) defines anxiety as ""The subjective feeling of tension, trepidation, nervousness, and worry associated to an activation of the nervous system." Scovel (1991, p. 18) similarly states, that ""Anxiety is a psychological construct, typically escribed by psychologists as a feeling of apprehension, a nebulous fear that is only tangentially associated to an object". It's important to distinguish between different types of anxiety. We utilize the time period particular anxiety when worry is limited to a specific scenario, such as speaking in a foreign language. Those who are normally nervous, on the other hand, are referred to as having generalized anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.610). The more detailed psychological category (Horwitz, 2001) distinguishes between the following anxiety types: 1. trait anxiety, 2. state anxiety, 3 situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is a tremendously stable personality trait (Scovel, 1978) while state anxiety is a brief response to a precise stimulus (Spielberger, 1983). Situation-specific anxiety is aroused by a particular kind of situation or event (MacIntyre – Gardner, 1994, p.290).

When anxiety is linked to learning a foreign language, it is referred to as "second/foreign language anxiety," and it refers to students' negative emotional reactions to language acquisition (Horwitz, 2001). Second/foreign language anxiety, according to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986,p.620), is a complex and multifaceted phenomena including self-perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors associated to S/FL classroom learning. Since the 1980s, when Stephen Krashen (1981) proposed that emotional elements (anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence) link with S/FL acquisition performance, the second/foreign language anxiety has been extensively researched.

Daly (1991,p11) focuses heavily on communication anxiety, citing genetic tendency, early reinforcements and punishments, early communication skills, and exposure to suitable communication models as relevant causes. Non-comprehension, the restricted time given to pedagogical and instructional methods, the potential of being humiliated via error correction, and the presence of native speakers all made participants in Von Wörde's research (1998) more apprehensive than normal. In speaking classes, Woodrow (2006,p.312) distinguishes between in-class and out-of-class anxiety, finding that contact with professors and performing in front of a class are the most significant causes to language anxiety. Specifically, giving oral presentations, role-play in front of class, contribution to formal discussions, answering teacher questions, informally speaking teachers were reported as major reasons for learners' in-class anxiety.

3.2 Causes and Effects of Language Anxiety

A number of things can contribute to language anxiety. According to Horwitz et al., the key origins of language anxiety are communication apprehension, fear of unfavorable assessment, and exam anxiety (1986,p.609). Young (1991, p. 332) identified six possible sources of language anxiety based on three factors: the learner, the teacher, and the instructional practice. He stated that Personal and interpersonal anxiety, learner attitudes toward language acquisition, instructor perspectives on language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing are all aspects that contribute to language anxiety.

Language anxiety is a side effect of linguistic inadequacy in processing language information, according to the Linguistic Coding Deficit Hypothesis established by Sparks and

Ganschow (1993, p. 292). The importance of language coding abilities was underlined by Sparks and Ganschow, who dismissed anxiety and other emotional variables as key elements in language development, leaving solely cognitive capacity as the fundamental driver of second/foreign language acquisition and development. Second language coding abilities are intimately related to first language coding abilities, according to Sparks and Ganschow, separating language development from its social cultural bases. By focusing primarily on cognitive capacities, their concept ignores major differences between first and second language development, particularly qualities that are indicative of the uniqueness of the second/foreign language learning environment.

Language anxiety, on the other hand, according to academics like MacIntyre (1999, p.285), is a type of social anxiety that stems primarily from the social and communicative aspects of language learning. Based on the social component of anxiety, MacIntyre has long maintained that anxiety plays an essential role in language learning as a social cognitive activity. There is a cyclical link between anxiety, cognition, and conduct. Worry can also block language acquisition at all stages: intake, processing, and output. In other words, a contextual awareness of the origins and effects of language anxiety is crucial to supporting language acquisition and development.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 120 (male=40; female=80) learners in AL-Mustansirya university, college of Art, English department during the academic year 2020_2021 in the first semester. In addition, the researchers grouped the subjects according to their English proficiency: second stage (low proficiency of English), and fourth stage (high proficiency of English).

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. The foreign language anxiety scale

The foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) was used in this study to measure Foreign Language anxiety. The scale consists of two parts: The first part of the study consisted of questions about the participant's personal information, while the second part assessed general foreign language anxiety using Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS), which is the most widely used scale for assessing general foreign language anxiety. This scale has 33 items that assess listening and speaking abilities (see Appendix A).The FLCAS adopts a 5-point Likert scale with response (1, 2 , 3 , 4 , 5) from " strongly agree"; "agree"; " neither agree nor disagree" ; "disagree"; to "strongly disagree". A range of (3.5-5.0) on Foreign Language Anxiety item is thought to reflect high level of Anxiety, (2.5-3.4) medium level of Anxiety, and (1.0-2.4) low level of Anxiety, See appendix (A). By using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients formula, reliability levels in the order of .80 or above have been reported for the FLCAS (Aida, 1994: r.80; Cheng et al., 1999: r.95; and Elkhafaifi, 2005: r.94) and Validity of the FLCAS =√0.71=0.84. The reliability coefficient of FLCAS would be acceptable if it is not less than (0.50); therefore, this result indicates that scale have good reliability and validity.

3.2.2 The Pilot Study

The pilot study is carried out in order to help the researcher to try out the scale before it takes its final shape (Abbot and Wingard ,1981,p.138. The researcher can use the pilot study

to assess the clarity of the scale items, determine the average time required to complete a scale, and estimate the discriminating power of each item on the scale.On June 6th, 2021, a pilot research will be conducted. The researcher chose 40 students from a non-sample study at random for the FLCAS pilot administration. The EFL students were then instructed to answer as many questions as they could.

3.2.3. Data analysis

The data was gathered by the researcher over the course of two weeks in June of 2021. With the help of the English teachers in charge of each class, all questionnaires were delivered to the samples and returned by the researcher. To perform the analysis of the acquired data, the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 20.0 was utilized. In order to study the demographic data and the level of foreign language anxiety, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were used. Learners' Perspectives on Foreign Language Anxiety were compared using an independent sample T-test based on gender and English competency level. In addition, all statistical tests in this study were conducted at the (0.05) level of statistical significance.

4. Results of Data Analysis

4.1. Question One

What is the most frequent level of overall Foreign Language Anxiety according to Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions?

Descriptive statistics was employed to investigate the most frequent level of overall Foreign Language Anxiety according to Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions. Table (1) illustrates that overall mean score of students' perception on Foreign Language Anxiety was *(M =330)*, which was approximately at a Medium level (with a range from 1 to 5). Also, table (1) presents rank ordering of Foreign Language Anxiety according to their frequent and important.

Table (1) overall mean score of students' perception on Foreign Language Anxiety

Item no.	*M*	SD	**Frequency** Category	Rank
1	2.32	1.351	low	33
2	3.31	1.340	Medium	13
3	3.30	1.440	Medium	14
4	3.36	1.437	Medium	10
5	2.66	1.381	Medium	25
6	2.68	1.339	Medium	24
7	3.02	1.400	Medium	21
8	3.47	1.436	high	7
9	3.43	1.374	high	9
10	3.51	1.414	high	4
11	3.33	1.351	Medium	11
12	2.34	1.246	low	31
13	2.36	1.299	Medium	30
14	3.49	1.254	high	5
15	3.45	1.372	high	8

16	2.63	1.392	Medium	26
17	2.33	1.288	low	32
18	3.58	1.247	high	3
19	2.44	1.319	low	29
20	3.32	1.302	Medium	12
21	2.51	1.367	low	28
22	2.64	1.376	Medium	27
23	3.23	1.321	Medium	15
24	3.03	1.397	Medium	20
25	3.59	1.368	High	2
26	2.70	1.420	Medium	23
27	3.12	1.351	Medium	18
28	3.07	1.271	Medium	19
29	3.48	1.267	high	6
30	3.29	1.299	Medium	16
31	2.87	1.322	Medium	22
32	3.24	1.254	Medium	17
33	3.89	1.220	high	1
total	3.30	0.98	Medium	
				N=120

4.2. Question two

Is there a significant difference in learners' perceptions toward Foreign Language Anxiety due to gender?

Independent - samples t-test formula for a correlated sample was employed to examine a significant difference between male and female students on their perceptions. The results of this (t-test) analysis are illustrated in Table (2)

Table (2) Summary of Foreign Language Anxiety due to gender

gender	M		SD		t	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Calculated	Tabulated
	2.84	3.14	0.699	0.859	3.350	1.660
	N = 40 Male / 80 Female					

In overall Foreign Language Anxiety, the calculated t-value is (t=3.350), the tabular one is (t =1.660) with the degree of freedom (118) which indicates that there is a significant difference at (0.05 level of significant) between male and female learners in overall strategy use. The mean of frequency of male learners in overall Foreign Language Anxiety was *(M* =2.84), and

the mean of frequency of female learners was *(M =3.14)*; therefore, male learners presented less frequently in using overall Foreign Language Anxiety than did female learners.

4.3. Question three

Is there a significant difference in learners' perceptions toward Foreign Language Anxiety due to level of proficiency?

Independent - samples *t*-test formula for a correlated sample was employed to examine a significant difference between low and high students on their their English proficiency. The results of this (t-test) analysis are illustrated in Table (3).

Table (3) Summary of Foreign Language Anxiety level of proficiency

	M		*SD*		*t*	
level of proficiency	low	high	low	high	Calculated	Tabulated
	3.27	2.20	0.599	0.786	2.857	1.660

N=120

Descriptive statistics was computed to understand the current situations of Foreign Language Anxiety level with different levels of English proficiency among EFL learners according to their perceptions. As shown in Table (3), in overall *of* Foreign Language Anxiety, the mean of low level was *(M*=3.27), and the mean high level was *(M*=2.20). the calculated t-value is *(t*=2.857), the tabular one is *(t* =1.660) with the degree of freedom (118) which indicates that there is a significant difference at (0.05 level of significant) between high level of English proficiency and low level of English proficiency in overall Foreign Language Anxiety, therefore, high level of English proficiency learners presented less frequently in using overall Foreign Language Anxiety than did low level of English proficiency learners.

5. Conclusions and Educational implications

Language anxiety is a pervasive phenomenon, particularly among second/foreign language learners. It is indeed a key emotional concept that has a significant impact on second/foreign language learning. Individual differences, such as affect and motivation, are fundamental aspects of developing cognitive ability, according to the realist viewpoint lens in cognitive psychology (Smith, 2000). It is vital to use a social cognitive perspective to better comprehend the idea of language anxiety, emphasizing the need of combining the social and cognitive elements (Lewis & Carpendale, 2004).

Anxiety and language learning studies may serve as a guidance for language teachers in terms of improving their understanding of language acquisition from the learner's point of view (Chao, 2003). These kinds of studies can also help educators discover out how to build effective language anxiety therapies for second/foreign language learners. Furthermore, by comprehending the origins and effects of language anxiety, as well as their link to language accomplishment, all stakeholders may benefit from methods and interventions designed to increase learners' self-confidence and reduce their language anxiety..

According to the findings of this study, the general level of Foreign Language Anxiety among EFL students at Iraqi colleges was Medium. Furthermore, the results revealed that male learners used total Foreign Language Anxiety less frequently than female learners, and that high level English proficiency learners used overall Foreign Language Anxiety less frequently than low level English proficiency learners.

Appendix (A)
The foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS)

This is the questionnaire about the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS). Please read each item carefully, and checks the most appropriate answer through the five response (1, 2, 3, 4 and 5).Answer in terms of how well the item describes you. Let the instructor know immediately if you have any questions. There are total (33) items in this questionnaire.

Thank you for your participation.

- **Information**
  Name: ……………. / Date: ……………. / Age:……………

No ..	item	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.					
2	I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.					
3	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class.					
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.					
5	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.					
6	During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.					
7	I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.					
8	I am usually not at ease during tests in my English class.					
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.					
10	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.					

11	I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes.					
12	In English class, I can get so nervous when I forget things I know.					
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.					
14	I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.					
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting in English class					
16	Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.					
17	I often feel like not going to my English class					
18	I feel confident when I speak in English class.					
19	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.					
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.					
21	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get					
22	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.					
23	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.					
24	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.					
25	English class moves so quickly that I worry about getting left behind in tests.					
26	I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.					
27	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.					
28	When I'm on my way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.					

29	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.						
30	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak in English.						
31	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.						
32	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.						
33	I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.						

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