

# THE CORRELATION BETWEEN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF LEARNING A LANGUAGE TOWARDS STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

*This study aimed to investigate the correlations between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and students' perceptions of learning a language towards students' performance in English as a foreign language (EFL). The participants were 99 students of Tianchang Senior High School, Anhui, China. All participants were taking two English courses concurrently: a) the International English Program, which was IELTS-based and focused on the communicative aspects of the language; and b) the regular English class, which focused on the national curriculum. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz (1986), and the Students' Perception Towards Learning English questionnaire adopted from Amal Ali Alkaff (2010) were used to measure the anxiety levels and perceptions respectively. These were then compared to the English reading scores obtained from regular school examinations. Correlational analyses showed moderate negative relations between FLA and reading scores, but no significant relations between perceptions and reading scores. Further multiple regressions also revealed FLA as a moderate predictor, implying a considerable bearing of FLA on reading proficiency levels. These findings are valuable insights for further studies, specifically, an investigation of the cause-and-effect relationships between language anxiety levels and EFL competencies as a whole, beyond reading skills.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Student's perception, Student's performance in English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety ranks as a crucial challenge to language students. Several asserts, when it comes to learning a foreign language, that they experience anxiety, which ultimately puts a barrier in reaching their desired goals of learning that specific language. Horwitz et al. (1986) said that these people may have experienced a mental block, although these same people may be good students in other situations, actively interested, and have a sincere liking for speakers of the target language. Nonetheless, Horwitz et al. (1986) pointed out that the anxiety these people experience inhibits their ability to perform productively in a foreign language class.

Given the current education landscape, teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a significant hindrance to be overcome in acquiring another language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Accordingly, second language researchers and theorists have long been aware that anxiety is often associated with language learning. Rachman (1998), as mentioned by Lui and Huang (2010), said that anxiety is one of the most prominent and prevalent emotions, was defined as a feeling of uneasy suspense, and has been a focus of research in foreign language education since the early 1970s.

## **Foreign Language Anxiety**

Zheng and Cheng (2018) defined foreign language anxiety (FLA) as a form of anxiety in the context of the foreign language classroom that is usually aroused by a particular type of situation (e.g., speaking a foreign language). In a broader research context, MacIntyre (1998) observed that language anxiety is a form of situational anxiety, and emphasized that research on the topic should employ measures of anxiety experienced in specific second language contexts, e.g., in classroom settings. He conceived language anxiety as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language."

It is imperative, therefore, to understand anxiety, as one of the pervasive psychological emotions and a prerequisite to providing the necessary support to anxious second/foreign language students (Zheng, 2008). Right and proper understanding of language anxiety within different contexts can provide a rationale for a careful investigation of foreign language students. In the study of Zheng and Cheng (2018), a better understanding and the nature and effect of anxiety in the context of high-stakes testing for Chinese university students learning English as a foreign language was undertaken. Results confirmed that the cognitive test anxiety factor was a significant negative predictor of language achievement.

Krashen (1982) also hypothesized that anxiety contributes negatively to an "affective filter" which makes an individual less responsive to language input. Many researchers hypothesized that anxiety specific to foreign language learning parallels three related performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Ganschow & Sparks, 1996). Horwitz et al. (1986) further speculated that foreign language anxiety is not merely the combination of the three performance anxieties but was a "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the (foreign) language learning process." They hypothesized that performance difficulties in a foreign language might be due, in some measure, to anxiety.

As there is a growing acceptance of students' feelings and reflections in the learning process within the foreign language teaching and learning community, researchers have to consider that FLA is a combination of personality traits such as self-esteem, inhibition, anxiety, risk-taking, and extraversion, which may well shape the ultimate success in mastering a foreign language (Dörnyei, 2007).

To understand foreign language anxiety in a broader scope, the aspects of anxiety, in general, should be discussed. Psychologically, anxiety has been categorized into three aspects: 1) trait anxiety, 2) state anxiety, and 3) situation-specific anxiety (Spielberger, 1983). The trait perspective occurs when a person has a permanent intent to be anxious (Scovel, 1978). It is a general personality trait, which does not change across several situations. Sieber, O'Neil, and Tobias (1977) claim that trait anxiety indicates "stable personality differences in anxiety proneness." This aspect of anxiety remains stable over time because it is a feature in the personality of an individual. According to Eysenck (1992), trait anxiety can damage cognitive functioning and interrupt memory.

The state perspective is defined as an emotional state. Spielberger (1972) explains state anxiety to be "the emotional reaction or pattern of response that occurs in an individual who perceives a particular situation as personally dangerous or threatening, irrespective of the presence or absence of objective danger." In contrast, a situation-specific perspective occurs at a particular point in time as a result of a specific situation (Spielberger, 1983). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) state that situation-specific anxiety is a unique anxiety form that happens

invariably over time within a given situation. It is closely related to specific circumstances in which one situation differs from another, but it is consistent over time.

The classical study of Horwitz et al. (1986) introduced a construct of FLA as situation-specific anxiety aroused by a specific type of situation or event. They believed that the adverse emotional reactions of students to language learning are brought about by the anxiety of learning a foreign language. To measure the amount of anxiety by students, they designed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Liu and Huang (2010) had also acknowledged that foreign language anxiety was situation-specific and claimed that individual differences in anxiety contributed to a difference in achievement.

As it is established that a considerable number of foreign, as well as second language students suffer from language anxiety when they step into the language classroom, an interconnection must be determined. What makes language learning environments, particularly English language learning situations, anxiety-provoking has been well-established in language anxiety literature, and the students' perception of language anxiety deserves a special mention as they are one of the parties directly involved in the learning process (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013).

### **Students' Perceptions of English as a Foreign Language**

Perceptions and attitudes in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are the most prominent factors in the learning process (Alkaff, 2013). Perception, according to Sykes (1964), as cited by Alkaff (2013), can be defined as regarding something "mentally in [a] specified manner." On the other hand, Baker (1993) defines attitude as "a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behavior."

The present study treats students' perceptions with students' attitudes. Despaigne (2010) elaborates on the relationship between perceptions and attitudes, explaining that perceptions center on the inner unconscious feelings from which students' attitudes towards learning a language emanate. Thus, attitudes may be defined as the behavioral outcomes of perceptions.

Sahin et al. (2016) noted that the effect of perceptions on the motivation in learning English is regarded as an essential problem. Also, how the students' negative and positive views of "English" affect their involvement in the learning activity and how they are motivated are important factors to be considered in learning English. The study of Jaliyya and Idrus (2017) also noted that the perception and attitude of students determine the effectiveness of the learning outcome.

Some studies connect attitude to achievement. For example, in their survey on final year high school students in eastern Turkey, İnal et al. (2003) emphasize the idea that "there is a high relationship between attitude and achievement." Likewise, Al-Mansour (2007) concludes that having positive attitudes towards Arabic speakers and spending enough time in an Arabic-speaking country are factors that help to acquire the best pronunciation in Arabic.

The importance of the attitude of the students in improving second/foreign language learning is undeniable. Brown (2000) affirmed that "it is easy in second language learning to claim that a student will be successful with the proper motivation." Furthermore, Gardner (2007) posits that "students with higher levels of motivation will do better than students with lower levels." He also said, "if one is motivated, he/she has reasons (motives) for engaging in the relevant activities, expends effort, persists in the activities, attends to the tasks, shows a desire to achieve the goal, enjoys the activities, etc (Gardner, 2007)." In short, the learning outcome of one person is highly determined by the level of attitude towards the subject either derived from the internal factors and the external factors such as parents, grades, and also public

opinion. Both are seen as influences in motivating and boosting the students' attitude toward learning.

### **Performance of Students in English as a Foreign Language**

Lababidi (2016) asserted that the extensive use of the English language globally had placed second language students (L2) on a challenging track of acquiring practical communicational skills. Conquering this challenge is illustrated as a guaranteed 'rite of passage' within higher education and subsequent success in the job market. Learning English as a second language encompasses many challenges to both students and educators alike. For students, these challenges are inherent in many a priori factors that are embedded in the student's unique psychosocial and educational framework. This framework takes into account the student's affective and cognitive predisposition in absorbing a second language. Feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and hesitation are usually exhibited by L2 students in learning to speak a second language. These feelings are contemplated to connote a negative and unfavorable consequence on communication in the target language (Lababidi, 2016).

Proficiency in the English language is determined by the students' motivation and attitude in learning the language. Brown (1994) stated that the learning of a second language is a complex process, involving a seemingly infinite number of variables. Ahen (2009) argued that regardless of the positive or negative attitude towards the second language, this is rooted in the perception of an individual toward certain objects or matters.

Language learning anxiety may be experienced due to linguistic difficulties foreign language students face in learning and using the target language (Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013). However, Horwitz (2001) claimed that foreign language anxiety is independent of first language learning disabilities and should be viewed as an essential factor that hinders language learning in and of itself.

Given these current perceptions of students towards the English language, the dynamic relationship between foreign language anxiety, students' perception of learning English, and student's performance in English as a Foreign language must be all taken into consideration.

An entire theoretical construct, the affective filter hypothesis, was posited by Krashen (1982) to recognize the impact of anxiety on language learning. According to Krashen, when second language students' anxiety is high, their affective filter is raised, and they become less able to process language input, neglect to take in the available target language messages, and do not progress in their language acquisition. Along similar lines, MacIntyre (1998) proposed that language anxiety causes divided attention and therefore diminishes levels of cognitive performance. In turn, Horwitz et al. (1986) noted that language students with high levels of anxiety tend to be self-conscious, have trouble concentrating, and dread making mistakes. As a result, they will evade communicative situations, study for prolonged times, become forgetful, and even experience mental block.

Qualitative studies have suggested that reluctance to communicate and anxiety affect each other in L2/FL learning. As a result of anxiety, EFL and English as a Second Language students often choose to remain quiet and are reluctant or less reluctant than other students to contribute in speech communication in class; then, due to their silence and aversion to speaking the language in class, they become (more) anxious (Liu, 2006).

The studies reviewed show the interplay of FLA, students' perception of learning language, and EFL performance. Seemingly, there is a dearth of studies on the correlation between FLA and students' perceptions in a language learning context. It is therefore deemed essential to

explore this research area to find out the relationship between FLA and students' perceptions of learning English as a foreign language as they relate to students' performance. This language learning context is situated, especially in a country like China, where EFL students have little exposure to the target language. When having to apply the language, they often become upset, nervous, and even panicky owing to little practice (Liu & Huang, 2010).

Moreover, in Chinese class, teachers put everything into students' heads, and students are seen as receptacles to be filled with knowledge. Teaching is test-driven; hence the teachers' concern is how to improve students' marks on tests. Students' attitudes or feelings are generally discounted (Zheng & Cheng, 2018). The present study attempted to investigate the correlation between FLA, students' perception of learning English, and students' performance in EFL in the Chinese context. The following are the research questions of the study:

1. What is the correlation between FLA and students' performance in EFL?
2. What is the correlation between students' perceptions of learning language and students' performance in EFL?
3. What is the correlation between FLA and students' perceptions of learning a language to students' EFL performance?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The study investigated the correlation between Foreign Language Anxiety and students' perception of learning a language towards students' performance in English as a Foreign Language. The participants were 99 senior high school students of Tianchang Senior High School, Anhui, China. All participants were taking two English courses concurrently: a) the International English Program, which is IELTS-based and focused on the communicative aspects of the language; and b) the regular English class, which focused on the national curriculum, but which grammar is more heavily emphasized during regular delivery.

### **Instrument**

Questionnaires were used in the study - one that measures students' foreign language anxiety and another that measures students' perception towards English as a foreign language. Both questionnaires have been translated into the Chinese language to make sure each statement is understood. To measure students' performance, the reading scores of students in the general paper examination were used.

### ***Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)***

This scale is adopted from Hortwitz et al. (1986) to measure students' anxiety in a foreign language classroom. It is a 30 item, five-point Likert scale questionnaire ranging from strongly agree for a score of 5 to strongly disagree for a score of 1. For the negatively worded items, specifically numbers 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, and 28, the order of scoring was reversed, so that a higher score would be an indicator of higher anxiety.

### ***Perception of Students towards Learning English Questionnaire***

To address the research problem of the study, 16 questions were from Amal Ali Alkaff's (2010) study which was adopted from previous literature. The questions were placed on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree for a score of 5 to strongly disagree for a score of 1. For the negatively worded items, specifically numbers 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 15, the order of scoring was reversed so that a higher score would be an indicator of higher anxiety.

### ***Performance in English***

The scores of all the participants in the final examinations, given on the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of January 2021, were collected as their performance in English. The total Reading scores of the participants in the General paper examination were used in the study.

### **Procedure**

The two questionnaires were administered to all the participants allowing them 20 minutes for each questionnaire to finish. Of the 99 collected questionnaires, 81 were complete for statistical analyses.

### **Data Analyses**

Correlational analyses were run to measure the relations between the variables, and further regression analyses were conducted to find out if the independent variables (i.e., FLCAS, student perception) could predict the dependent variable (i.e., Reading scores).

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

The study was carried out to investigate the correlations between FLA and students' perception of learning a language towards students' performance in EFL. The first research problem sought to find a correlation between FLA and students' performance in EFL.

The simple linear regression analysis showed a moderate negative correlation between the total FLCAS scores and reading scores ( $r = -.31$ ,  $P < .01$ ). Moreover, total FLCAS scores explained 10% of the variance in exam scores ( $R^2 = .1$ ), and are a weak predictor of Reading Scores,  $t(79) = 2.88$ ,  $p < .01$ .

The statistical findings showed that higher anxiety correlates with reading scores. There was a relationship between FLA and students' performance but there was no way to tell of any direct-cause effect between them. Moreover, the result showed that FLCAS is a weak predictor of students' reading scores.

The second problem investigates whether there is a correlation between students' perception of learning language and students' performance in EFL.

The results of the simple linear regression analysis showed that there were no significant correlations between Students' Perception and Reading Scores ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p = .13$ ). Students' perception explained 3% of the variance in exam scores ( $R^2 = .03$ ), and is not a predictor of reading scores,  $t(79) = -1.52$ ,  $p = .13$ .

The data showed that there are no relations between students' perception or attitude towards the English Foreign Language and their linguistic performance. It is understood from this result that there is a possibility that even if students do not like learning English, they might still perform well.

The third research problem investigated the correlation between FLA and students' perceptions of learning a language to students' EFL performance.

The results, through a multiple regression analysis, revealed that the overall model fit was significant,  $F(2,78) = 4.33$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the combination explained 10% of the variance in Reading Scores ( $R^2 = .1$ ). Furthermore, the total FLCAS Score is a good predictor of Reading Scores,  $t(78) = -2.49$ ,  $p < .05$ , though student perception does not predict Reading scores when Total FLCAS Score is controlled for,  $t(78) = -0.66$ ,  $p = .51$ .

Based on the result, student perception does not predict reading scores. Though the performance may dip as anxiety increases with FLA being a reasonably moderate predictor, student perceptions have no bearing on the performance.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Correlation between Foreign Language Anxiety and Students' Performance in EFL***

The study found that there is a moderate negative correlation between Foreign Language Anxiety and students' performance in EFL. This finding is consistent with previous studies. The study of Halder (2018) observed a significant negative correlation between English language anxiety and academic achievement. Also, Demirdas and Bozdogan (2013) found a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and students' performance. Similarly, Sahin et al. (2016) revealed that there is a relationship between English language anxiety and academic performance in English of the B.Ed. students. The result of the study indicates that the correlation between foreign language anxiety and students' performance does not mean that there is a direct cause-effect between these two variables. Mcneese (2020) explains that when two variables are trending up or down, correlation analysis will show there is a significant relationship – simply because of the trend, not necessarily because there is a cause and effect relationship between the two variables. In the chapter that outlines the concept of test anxiety and its impact on performance, Goonan (2003) reiterates that test, as a form of anxiety does not have a direct effect on academic performance, but is dependent on many factors. The study upholds its findings that a correlation exists between foreign language anxiety and students' performance, but any causation can't be determined.

The result of the statistical data analysis of the study also shows that the FLA is a weak predictor of low performance. This finding is compatible with similar studies investigating the influence of anxiety on language performance. Salehi and Marefat's (2014) correlation investigation, found both foreign language anxiety and test anxiety had a statistically significant negative correlation with the exam grades. FLCAS, however, are not identifiable statistically. In another study, Ying Zheng and Cheng (2018) reported that test anxiety and test confidence as forms of anxiety are closely correlated and are significant predictors of test scores, Foreign Language Anxiety, however, does not significantly predict test performance. The present study suggests that while a relationship between foreign language anxiety and students' performance exists, foreign language anxiety is not a salient predictor of language performance. The students' personalities should be taken into consideration to determine the reasons for being unsuccessful (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1999).

### ***Correlation between Students' Perceptions of Learning language and Students' Performance in EFL***

The result of the present study showed that there are no significant correlations between students' perceptions of learning language and their performance in their reading scores. This finding is supported by previous studies. Persky et al. (2020) reported that there was a lack of correlations between perceptions of learning and actual gains in knowledge. It also found that there were weak correlations between the perception of learning and post-reading scores of students. This study confirms the finding of the present study that perception is not a predictor of reading scores. The study of Agustiani (2017) also showed that students' reading attitude had a very small contribution to their reading comprehension achievement. Similarly, Das et al. (2014) revealed that attitude towards education and academic achievement have very low negative relations (-0.10) which is not statistically significant. One research also investigated the relationship between students' perception toward the teaching and learning

methods of Mathematics' lecturer and students' achievement, revealed that there is no significant correlation between the perception and the average scores in Mathematics achievement of the students.

The no significant correlation result from the research between students' perceptions towards learning language and students' performance in EFL can affirm that the performance of students in English as a Foreign language is not affected by preconceived notions and perceptions about learning English. To that effect, perception does not reflect learning (Persky et al., 2020). Experts in language learning believe that a good learner will find their way of learning; organize the information they get about language; study the grammar and words; practice the language inside and outside the classroom; learn from mistakes; try to communicate even though they know very little about the context; and learn various speaking styles to communicate differently in different situations, either formal or informal (Jalliya & Idrus, 2013). So no matter the attitude towards learning English, students will still push for proficiency and not affect their performance. Admittedly, the underlying rationale for studying English in China is essentially economic, since it is seldom studied for its own sake. Chinese students are obliged to learn English if they hope to gain a better position in a global economy where English is the lingua franca (Zheng & Cheng, 2018).

### ***Correlation between Foreign language Anxiety and students' Perception of Learning Language towards students' Performance in EFL***

Modern research shows that there is a relationship between students' achievement and attitude towards education. Attitudes are beliefs and emotions which comprise the affective domain of learners. In education, the academic success of students depends on their attitude towards a subject (Das et al., 2014). Following the same concept, one researcher posits that attitude is one factor that may influence students' academic achievement. The present study investigated the correlation between foreign language anxiety and student's perception towards learning a language to students' performance. The study revealed that when both FLA and perception towards language learning are combined, the learner's performance is more or less predicted. Moreover, the study found that between foreign language anxiety and student perception, the former is a slightly better predictor, whereas perception cannot predict anything. From the above result, it can be understood that there have some other prime factors other than attitude which influence the performance of the students.

Foreign language classroom anxiety is attributable to a variety of causes. Levels of difficulty in some foreign language classes, students' personal perceptions of their own language aptitude, personality variables, and stressful classroom experiences were all possible causes of anxiety (Zheng & Cheng, 2018). Scholarly traditions in Chinese culture may also have shaped or influenced the learning of English as a foreign language in China. Examples of these traditions are the emphasis on rote memorization, the central role of textbooks and grammar, and the perception of teachers and parents as authority figures, all of which are potential causes of anxiety (Zheng & Cheng, 2018). The respondents in the present study expressed similar thoughts on their anxiety while learning the subject, which explains the significance between FLA and students' perceptions. This correlation can underline that FLA is an essential factor influencing student's level of achievement in foreign language learning (Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014)



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In light of the findings from this study, it seems that language anxiety levels might have a considerable effect on language learning. Though this seems to be intuitively common knowledge – that learners will not do well if they experience anxiety towards a subject, this study has provided some empirical support. This very intuition is at the same time also rather misleading, as the findings revealed that student perceptions have no bearing on the exam scores (in this case the reading component), which goes against the common thinking that negative feelings toward a subject (in this case perceptions) might impede language learning. When these two variables are considered together, the results were similar, as FLA was the only variable that could predict performance, albeit a weak one. In this case, it might look as though emotions play a bigger part than perceptions.

In conclusion, this present study provides more understanding of the relationships between foreign language anxiety (FLA), students' perceptions toward learning a language and, reading proficiency levels. This also presents possibilities for further research, especially between language anxiety, and other components of language learning beyond reading comprehension skills.

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