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Investigating the Effect of Anxiety of Male and Female Iranian EFL Learners on their Writing Performance

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Abstract

In an attempt to delve into the issue of affective variables related to language learning, the present study focuses on the relationship between anxiety and writing performance across Iranian EFL learners with the effect of gender. To do so, Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) and writing performance test were applied to collect the data. 45 EFL learners were invited to participate in this study. T-test analysis revealed that significant difference was found in level of anxiety between male and female participants so that the male participants might experience relatively greater amount of anxiety. Additionally, the level of cognitive anxiety was higher in males. However, the level of somatic anxiety and avoidance behavior were not significantly different. Furthermore, significant differences were found in grammar and punctuation sub-scales of writing performance between male and female participants so that male was higher in two sub-scales than that of females. Various educational implications and recommendations for further works were proposed.

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1. Introduction

Of the four language skills, writing has always been the main concern of EFL practitioners and researchers (June, 2008). The usual justification for this is that the ability to write in English is considered vital to equip learners for success in college and their future careers (Tuan, 2010). In addition, the writing process contributes to the development of learners cognitive skills in attaining the required strategies in the learning process such as analysis, synthesis, inference, etc (Bacha, 2002). However, most of Iranian EFL students have been found to have

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an inadequate competence in L2 writing (Jafari & Ansari, 2012; Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Zaree & Farvardin, 2009). The failure of Iranian EFL students in L2 writing as effectively as they should, can perhaps be attributed to a variety of factors including L2 writing instruction, lack of motivation, L2 writing feedback, lack of target language proficiency and vocabulary, the interference of L1 into L2 and psychological variables such as anxiety which is the focus of this study. Many language educators and researchers believe that anxiety can be considered as one of the major predictors of academic performance (McCraty, 2007, as cited in Sioson, 2011; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, as cited in Trang et al., 2012) conceptualize foreign language anxiety as a specific type of anxiety and define it as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning process” (p.128). Research studies with L1 writers show that language writing anxiety has an adverse effect on their writing outcome (Daly & Millar; 1975; Daly & Shamo, 1975; Bloom, 1980; Leki, 1990; Matthews, 2001). Therefore, an implication would be that the writing performance of EFL learners might be affected by levels of anxiety. With the importance of the learner status in the circle of language learning; affective factors such as learners' attitudes, empathy, inhibition, motivation and anxiety have been accounted for successful outcomes of language learning in different contexts, (Na, 2007). Since the past three decades, anxiety as an influential factor has been under scrutiny and examined among a wide community of language learners, particularly foreign language learners in many contexts (Na, 2007). The current history of studies on anxiety in the language learning area is remarkably influenced by the seminal paper of Horwitz et al., (1986). One major contribution of their paper is that it offers a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986). This kind of self-report instrument, eliciting responses of anxiety specific to foreign language classroom settings, triggered an avalanche of similar studies. Research of this kind (see e.g. Ohata, 2005; Cao, 2011; Al-Seraj, 2011; Idr, 2012; Mamhot, Martin and Masangya, 2013) includes research studies aimed at exploring the extents and levels of FLL anxiety as well as the types of anxieties in a wide variety of EFL contexts. One of the earliest and most prominent scholars to investigate second/foreign language anxiety is Horwitz who claimed that language-anxious students often study more than low-anxious students; however, their level of achievement does not reflect that effort (Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz et al. (1986) stated that there are three components of foreign language anxiety: communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Students feel apprehensive about writing, especially when written assignments contribute substantially to the course final grade (Schmidt, 2004). Those with writing anxiety may experience higher anxiety when asked to write, and this anxiety is evident in their behaviors, attitudes, and written work. In terms of written work, those with writing anxiety tend to have more difficulty in creating ideas for writing, produce shorter words, and experience difficulty with grammatical usage and mechanics (Reeves, 1997; Shang, 2012). Undoubtedly, writing anxiety can be a deterrent to learning. To test this theory, Horwitz et al. (1986) conducted a study with 75 English learners of Spanish at an American university in their regular language class. The study revealed that significant foreign language anxiety was experienced by many students which adversely affected their performance in that language. This finding is supported by Aida's (1994) and Kitano's (2001) studies, indicating that a fair amount of anxiety existed in the Japanese classroom and that foreign language anxiety were inversely correlated with language performance. Kitano further concluded that students' anxiety levels were significantly and positively correlated with their decreased perception of their own ability in the target language. Although EFL learners often assess their own learning ability, considerable research has suggested that errors in self-assessment do occur; EFL students sometimes underestimate or overestimate their language ability (MacIntyre et al., 1997). Part of the reason is that the affective factor of language anxiety may particularly bias the self-perceptions of second/foreign language competence (Dörnyei, 1995; MacIntyre et al., 1997; Ready-Morfit, 1991). As mentioned earlier by Bandura (1988), perceptions of self-efficacy determine the amount of effort expended in pursuing a goal. In other words, students' beliefs in their capabilities play a crucial role in their ability to learn how to write (Jones, 2008). When EFL learners have low self-efficacy of writing competence, they expend less effort, with less success. Accumulating evidence has also indicated that anxiety leads to lower writing performance. For example, Lee (2002) and Lee and Krashen (1997), using Taiwanese university students as subjects, found a modest but consistent relationship between writing anxiety and actual EFL writing performance. Daly's (1985) research has shown that high apprehensive scored lower on standardized tests of writing and wrote essays that received lower evaluations. Cheng et al. (1999) conducted a study with university-level English majors in Taiwan to complete a version of Daly and Miller's (1975) Writing Anxiety Scale. The researchers reported that

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