

## The Effects of Anxiety on Iranian EFL Learners Performance through Pre and Post-Test on Case Study

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### Abstract

*Anxiety is negatively correlated with performance in learning English as a foreign language. This survey focuses on the high school students. This paper tried to study the effect of anxiety on the English learners in Iran. It is necessary to undertake further investigations to get more information and clarity on the aspects related to anxiety. Thus, this study is aimed at exploring the effect on life syllabus on Iranian EFL learners' anxiety. The finding of the study may provide information for curriculum planners, teachers and learners regarding reducing anxiety in foreign language class. This research also presents a new flash in EFL classroom, and teachers can use life syllabus in their teaching. Also, learners can learn easier, enhance their motivation to get proficiency and reduce their anxiety. This study aims to investigate the correlation between EFL students' language anxiety and the use of life syllabus in English classrooms. This subject is investigated to find out how to best utilize the life syllabus teaching method as a means of reducing language learning anxiety. The reason for selection of Life Syllabus as a new remedy has been two folds: First, revealing the factors that lead to anxiety among learners, then, recommending and developing a program that can reduce anxiety among learners.*

**Keywords:** *EFL Learners' Performance, learning anxiety, English achievement, English Language teaching*

### 1. Introduction

Oxford, Lavine, and Crookall (1989) believe that language learners face cognitive and affective barriers. Griffin et al., (2007) holds that learners may suffer from emotional problems like anxiety, stress, etc. that can be reduced by engaging learners in enjoyable activities in English Language teaching (ELT) environments. Such activities are exactly what Pishghadam (2011) calls as life syllabus. However, as Pishghadam (2011) points out until now few studies have been implemented to support and operationalize the appropriateness and effectiveness of this new educational perspective, i.e., life syllabus. For instance, the field of psychology has produced some interesting and useful implications from ELT to cure some abnormal psychological characteristics of learners such as anxiety, stress and etc. (Hosseini&Navari, 2012).

It also may have major implications for EFL instructors, especially in our own country, Iran, given its potential to reveal EFL learners' anxiety. Instructors, thus, can mitigate students' anxiety through life syllabus. Besides, material developers and course designers could greatly benefit from the results of this study. Material developers can tailor the books to the specific needs of a particular group of students by presenting the opportunities to reduce anxiety. In addition, course designers could identify the characteristic anxiety of their course attendants and supply them with the most appropriate remedies.

#### 1.1 Applied ELT and Life Syllabus

ELT was recognized to be a part of applied linguistics, and English language teachers were the only consumers of the findings of other disciplines, especially linguistics (Schmitt, 2002). Three main explications are provided to display genesis of ELT towards linguistics. First, as Mackey (1965) has called attention to language teachers to associate themselves with linguistics that was objective and scientific by separating themselves from the subjective language teachers. Since linguistics concerns with the most detailed descriptions of language, the linguistic approach was responsible for teaching methodology. Second, Chomsky (1957) made linguistics well known among English language teachers by his revolutionary work. Third, according to Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008) any discipline to be accepted solemnly as a science, it has to adjust to the standards set by main disciplines. Therefore, ELT should be recognized as a scientific field of study and discipline to use the results obtained in linguistics or psychology.

Prabhu (1990), Allwright (1992), and Kumaravadivelu (1994) defined the idea of the method in ELT. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies were given more attention during this post methods era. Psycholinguistic books such as *the psychology of language teachers* (Williams & Burden, 1997), *the psychology of language learner* (Dornyei, 2005), and *the psychology of second language acquisition* (Dornyei, 2009) incorporated a linguistic basis. A movement for ELT theorizers and practitioners was changing their orientation from consumer to autonomous to play a producer role. Applied ELT means the application of ELT in other fields. Generally, we apply other disciplines' findings including, psychology, sociology, neurology, linguistics, physics, etc. for cultivating language teaching and learning theories.

Pishghadam (2011) has given a new horizon to ELT, called applied ELT that can contribute to other domains of knowledge such as psychology and sociology. It provides learners and teachers with several features of ELT classes in order to boost several life skills. Furthermore, *life syllabus* was introduced to language teachers to give more precedence to life skills in ELT classes (Pishghadam&Zabihi, 2012).

Applied ELT, with the aim of sending Life Syllabus as a map for the ELT community to consider the improvement of these life skills prior to language learning, was further expanded by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012). ELT classes can, therefore, be suitable places for life skills training programs. Life skills training is a valuable extra practice in general education and in ELT in order to try to make learners ready for meeting the life's challenges such as anxiety, stress, depression, and other educational needs (Pishghadam&Zabihi, 2012).

Pishghadam and Zabihi (2013) have presented *English for Life Purposes (ELP)* as a new notion in English language teaching. They discuss that the focus of teaching English as a second/foreign language has changed from considering learners' specific needs in the study to improve their life qualities that enable the learners to compare their home culture with other cultures and emboss their identities. It not only allays the learners' anxiety, depression, or other negative aspects of life while it also enables the teachers to improve the learners' emotional, intellectual and motivational abilities while teaching them a second/foreign language.

Learners may experience psychological problems in adjusting to normality and think that violence is the only way to address problems. Based on Applied ELT and life syllabus ,development is not only “economic growth, but also social investment, individuals' empowerment, satisfaction of the basic needs such as healthcare, education and social safety nets as well as political and cultural freedom and all other aspects of people' lives” ( Pishghadam and Zabihi, 2013).

### **1.2 Anxiety**

Anxiety seems to be impossible to define in a simple sentence. In its simplest form, anxiety is related with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, insecurity, or apprehension that is intricately intertwined with self-esteem issues and natural fears (Brown, 1994). Scovel (1978) defines anxiety as “a state of apprehension, a vague fear...” According to these definitions, anxiety is a kind of fear that may cause a learner a negative feeling in class. For example, we have all experienced anxiety to some extent as language learners.

It happens when we doubt our abilities to perform a certain task, and we feel nervous about succeeding in it. So, anxiety relates to foreign language learning. Since the 1970 language learning anxiety has been studied. According to the results of these studies, it has been difficult to show the exact effects of anxiety on foreign language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz& Cope, 1986). The reason is that anxiety is difficult to measure and a problem can cause in defining, manipulating and quantifying it. However, the findings of the earliest studies have all suggested that the level of anxiety in second or foreign language learning must be reduced.

### **1.3. Trait Anxiety, State Anxiety, and Situational Anxiety**

Three types of anxiety such as the trait anxiety, the state anxiety, and the situation-specific anxieties have been investigated in a number of different areas, including the language learning context (MacIntyre& Gardner, Moorcroft, 1987;1991).Trait anxiety is a more permanent predisposition to be anxious. But , state anxiety is evoked whenever a person perceives the stimulus as harmful. Trait anxiety may be inferred from the frequency and the intensity of an individual's elevations in anxiety state over time. Thus, trait anxiety refers to stable personality differences in anxiety proneness. However, state anxiety is momentary, and it relates to some particular event or a situation (Brown (1994).

Research studies on anxiety have demonstrated the pervasive influence that anxiety can have on cognitive, effective, and behavioral functioning. Even though the trait anxiety has been supported by different studies; this approach is criticized by researchers such as Mischel and Peake (1982). They argued that traits are meaningless unless they are considered in interaction with situations. The trait anxiety approach requires people to consider their reactions to a number of situations. Some of the participants may feel anxious whereas others feel relaxed. In spite of the fact that participants have the same trait anxiety score anxiety will differ in the situations. For example, in MacIntyre and Garners (1991) study two subjects score equally on the trait anxiety scale, but this scale has four subscales referring to experiences in social situations, during writing tests or exams, in novel situations and in dangerous situations. The scores in the situational elements are different. The first participant feels anxious in social situations but enjoys written exams. The second participant feels anxious in tests but at ease in social groups. Both of them have similar levels of anxiety in the novel and in dangerous circumstances. The results suggest that correlation between trait anxiety and marks in these classes likely would be increased if the more clearly delimited subscales were considered. State anxiety refers to the apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time. For example, in test-taking time a person may feel state anxiety, and if someone has higher trait anxiety, then he or she will show higher state anxiety in stressful situations. So, trait and state anxieties are associated with each other.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) define situation-specific anxiety as a form of state anxiety that persists not necessarily across situations but with certain situations consistently across time. They think that situation-specific anxiety is more diverse than are the state and trait anxieties and one can concentrate on a particular thing in situational anxiety. The advantage of this perspective is in clearly describing the situation of interest for the participant. In this way, the assumptions about the source of anxiety can be avoided. The disadvantage of the situational anxiety is that the situation under consideration can be defined broadly, narrowly or quite specifically and the researcher is responsible for defining it accordingly for the purpose of the study.

The situation-specific anxiety can demonstrate an important role for anxiety in the language learning process. Situational anxiety is related to a particular situation, and language anxiety can be one type of situational anxiety and is not a personality trait. In this content, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) defined situational anxiety as “the apprehension experienced when a situation requires to use a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient.” The examples of situation-specific anxiety can be public speaking, writing examinations, performing math, or participating in a foreign language class. Three research traditions (state, trait, situation-specific) in foreign language anxiety studies are described briefly.

#### **1.4. Facilitating/Debilitating Anxieties**

In recent years researchers have become interested in language anxiety as a major issue in learning foreign languages. Alpert and Haber (1960) distinguished between two types of language anxiety: facilitating and debilitating. Facilitating anxiety influences the learner in a positive, motivating way and is best described as enthusiasm for a challenging task. In contrast, debilitating anxiety includes the unpleasant feelings such as worry and dread that interfere with the learning process.

Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to “flee” the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior (ibid).

An example for facilitating anxiety is when the students compare themselves with other students in class and comparison helps the students to improve more in language classes. However, in debilitating anxiety, students face problems in learning, and language learning becomes impaired for them. In speaking of successful self-image, students have positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language, and they are successful in learning. Thus, Bailey’s (1983) study suggests that language classroom anxiety can be caused and or aggravated by the learners’ competitiveness when they see themselves as less proficient than another object of comparison. She suggested a cyclic relationship between anxiety and negative competitiveness which is presented in figure 1.

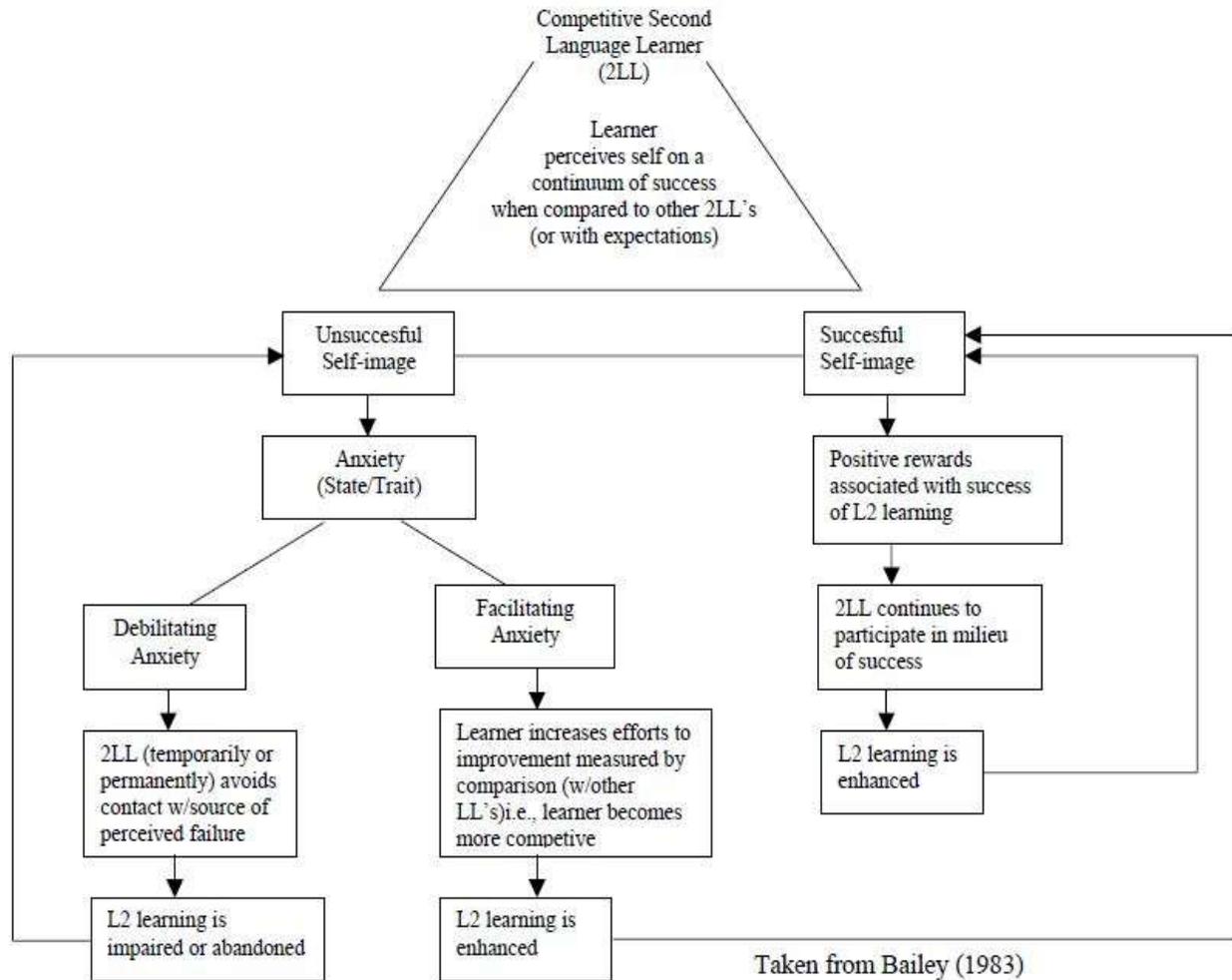


Figure 1: A cyclic relationship between anxiety and negative competitiveness

All the results of the study support Bailey's (1983) findings that competitiveness would help to overcome the difficulty during a learning process. Another explanation provided was that the students' being away from their native countries for the first time and new environment might have increased their anxiety. The researcher has taken into consideration the finding of the study offers some useful implications. Low-stress activities in the friendly atmosphere can be first steps of decreasing anxiety in foreign language classroom. This might suggest that issues of facilitating and debilitating anxieties may be central to research on anxiety.

**2. Research method**

A quasi-experimental design along with questionnaires and face to face interviews are used in this study. A pre-test and post-test with the control and experimental group conducted to get participants' performance before and at the end of using Life Syllabus. In order to probe the research questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H1:** There is a relationship between life syllabus and learners' anxiety.

**H2:** There is a relationship between life syllabus and learners' proficiency.

**2.1. Procedure**

The questionnaires administered during the learners' regular class time by their English teachers. Before the administration procedure, a brief explanation of the purpose of the study was given to the learners. Both groups, initially, took the pretest. Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire developed by Horwitz,

Horwitz & Cope (1986) was administered. This questionnaire consists of thirty-three statements on communication apprehension, tests anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The scale will be used in the questionnaire is five points Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly.

The researchers are going to personally involved in the administration of the instrument in order to clarify the misunderstanding. The questionnaire handed to each learner individually, and instructions read out and explained. Respondents can ask for clarity. Questions are translated into mother tongue if it is necessary. Estimating time is about 66 minutes.

The experimental study began. Participants took part in a pre-test of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire. Their scores obtained. Then, they received an instructional program called life syllabus. One institute received treatment with life syllabus. Another institute received traditional instructional methods and hence is considered as control group. A post-test questionnaire from Mejias, Applbaum, and Trotter (1991) are composed of twenty-eight items about the student's participation and anxiety in the classroom was given to all groups. This questionnaire is also a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from never to always. The questionnaire prepared in two parallel versions. Participants' scores on both pretest and posttest compared and analyzed. Regarding experimental groups, if there is a significant difference between participants' scores on pre- and post-tests, then we can see a role for life syllabus in reducing anxiety. Concerning control groups, participants' anxiety scores on pre- and post-tests should be nearly similar.

The final data collection technique employed in this investigation was interviewing. There are suggestions about what makes for an effective interview. Interviewing is a deliberate way to learn about what people think, feel, and experiences in their life. This data collection functioned more as a case study since my role as an interviewer needed to allow for ambiguity and to be open-minded for the possible insight that could generate more research in the future (Merriam, 1995).

Before generating questions for my interviews, one important component was selecting the right informants to interview. Interview candidates were selected by reporting high levels of anxiety, differentiated anxiety levels from mainstream and ESL classroom and/or low levels of anxiety on the ELAS. Further, one candidate was selected for insightful and elaborate responses when some of the questions were field tested. Some candidates had more characteristics of anxiety from anecdotal observations in the ESL classroom than others. Some candidates were not selected because students were uncomfortable with the prospect of interviewing and/or other reasons. Interviewing requires willing participants as mentioned earlier. Fortunately, the initial core group of selected interview candidates agreed to be interviewed. The ELAS provided an objective baseline for looking at how levels of language anxiety affected the students inside and outside of the classroom. Six candidates were interviewed, and four were selected for a more descriptive analysis. To have a successful interview, Merriam (1995) presents varying ways to structure questions in a manageable framework. Interview questions can be identified on three levels from highly structured, semi-structured, to unstructured. Merriam emphasized that the biggest chunk of an interview should be directed by the issues that the researcher is exploring. The precise wording or order of the questions is not entirely outlined ahead of time. By interviewing in this way, the researcher can look for what is emerging and possible new concepts to be discovered (Merriam, 1995). The technique for interviewing in this study followed some of these above suggestions since the aim was to get a wealth of data from the students' perspectives. Appendix E lists the interview questions chosen for this study. Students were also asked additional questions after interviews for clarification and further discovery.

All of the sixth grade ESL students that completed the questionnaires were potential candidates for interviews. As mentioned above the participants were selected based on responses to the questions from the questionnaire. Participants who experienced high levels of language anxiety were selected as well as students on the opposite end of the continuum.

Six students were interviewed and recorded via Audacity, a computer software program. Students completed the questionnaires from the original research study. Six students were initially interviewed in the library after taking the questionnaire. The students involved in the interviews were at or above advanced level English proficiency, so the interviews were conducted in English.

### 3. Results

### 3.1. Data Analysis

In this section, analysis of the data related to the hypotheses raised at the beginning of the study, including both descriptive and test statistics in tables and graphs are presented for each research question and hypothesis. Then, for each research question, the results are interpreted and discussed in light of the previous research findings. The gathered data entered into the SPSS program and analyzed for the purpose of this study. The frequency and descriptive statistics used. An independent-sample t-test run with the pretest scores to check the homogeneity of the two groups at the beginning of the study.

First, we entered the data while entering we keep numbers in order not to confuse them. The questionnaires are including positive and negative items. Sample items are as follows: “I’m never quite sure of myself when speaking in my foreign language class”, “I can feel my heart pounding when I’m going to be called on in language class”, “I don’t worry about making mistakes in language class”, “I enjoy speaking in English”.

To analyze the data the frequencies and percentage of each item in the questionnaires computed with the aid of SPSS. Also, Analysis of Variance runs to compare EFL learners' pre-test and post-test scores. In the interview part, the researcher is going to process, identify, manipulate and code data manually instead of using a software program. Interviews are analyzed based on coding. That is, we record the voices, listen to them, transcribe, organize and finally give them some codes. Self-developed questions are used to facilitate research in the form of interviews. Highlighters are used, and copies of interview transcripts divided into different categories and sorted into broad themes.

### 3.2. Students’ and Teachers’ Perceptions about Students’ Participation, Anxiety, and Students’ Language Levels.

The third section of the data analysis deals with the relationship between students’ language level and students’ and teachers’ perceptions about their participation in the class.

This section of the data analysis deals with the relationship between students’ language level and students’ and teachers’ perceptions about their participation in the class. To analyze this section point- biserial correlation method was used. The results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Language Level and Students’ and Teachers’ Perceptions About Students’ Participation

Variable	Language level	Significant
Students’ Perceptions About Their Participation	.093	.425
Teachers’ Perceptions About Students’ Participation	.248	.031

The results show that students’ perceptions about their participation did not correlate with language level ( $r = .093$ ,  $p < .425$ ), indicating that students at different language levels did not perceive their participation differently. However, teachers’ perceptions about their students’ participation correlated positively with students’ language levels ( $r = .248$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The degree of correlation was rather moderate and significant. It indicates that teachers’ feel that students are participating more at the advanced levels than in the intermediate levels. This finding is consistent with and confirms the previous findings that students and teachers differed on their judgments about students’ participation.

The next table 2, presents the results of the analysis of the relationship between students’ language levels and teachers’ and students’ perceptions about students’ anxiety.

Table 2: Language Level and Students’ and Teachers’ Perceptions About Students’ Anxiety and FLCAS

Variable	Language Level	Significance
Teachers’ Perceptions About Students’ Anxiety	.082	.482
FLCAS	.248	.995

Note: FLCAS = Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

As Table 2 shows, there was almost no relationship between teachers’ perceptions about students’ anxiety and students’ language levels ( $r = .082, p < .482$ ). Foreign language anxiety as measured by FLCAS did not correlate with students’ language levels ( $r = .001, p < .995$ ) either. It means that according to the student’s perceptions language levels do not play any role.

A box plot (Figure 2) was drawn to show the results gained on the pre-test. The figure shows that the students in the experimental and control groups have expressed almost similar performance on the pre-test.

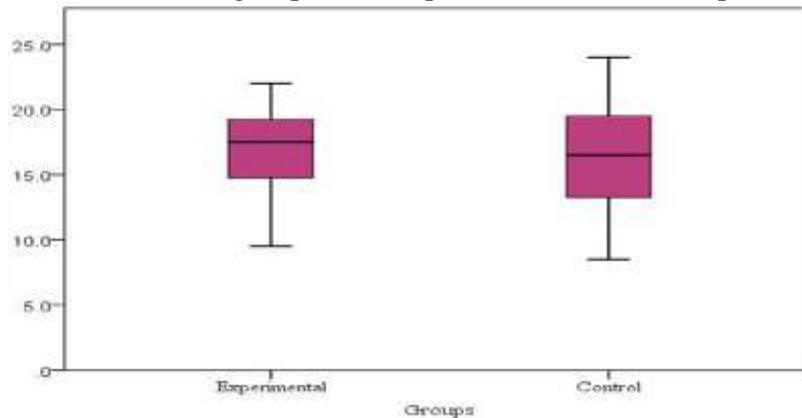


Figure 2 Two groups’ means and scores on anxiety pre-test

The researcher draws a bar graph (Figure 3) to illustrate the results obtained on the post-test graphically. As manifested in the figure, the students in the experimental group, who have been taught Life Syllabus, have acted significantly superior to those in the control group, who have been taught with the traditional method.

Figure 3 Two groups’ means of anxiety post-test

### 3.3. Data Collected from Interviews

#### 3.3.1 Case study: Iman

Iman was eager to participate in the interview. In the EFL classroom, this student was very insightful and candid. He demonstrated minimal complications speaking on the spot in front of the class. He enjoyed impromptu speaking in the EFL classroom, sharing responses in the class, and enjoyed higher level questioning. He sometimes appeared nervous when questioning, but usually asked questions. This student had a good rapport with peers. One of the reasons Iman selected was because the FLCAS survey indicated Iman's high level of language anxiety in many domains of the questionnaire, most notably in mainstream classes, compared with anxiety in EFL classes. According to the FLCAS, he panics when he has to speak English in the mainstream versus the neutral rating in EFL. He reported high anxiety in regular classes when preparing to speak and forgetting how to say things he knew, compared to having no anxiety in EFL. He feared teachers correcting mistakes, and he was uncomfortable with not being able to express his true feelings in English in mainstream classes, compared to EFL where he rates his anxiety as neutral.

It is important to note that Juan responded as having high levels of anxiety in both EFL and mainstream; however, this was not evident in his FLCAS results. Iman provided many curious responses about what influences his decisions to speak English or not. He rated himself as being very uncomfortable speaking English in the institute. He reported that he is most comfortable in the EFL teacher's class, "Because it's like a class you that can speak both languages than the other classes.

In EFL class Iman speaks both to peers and his teacher. When asking him about how often he speaks in EFL, he states "a lot" and sharing in Persian as important. Conversely, in mainstream classes, when inquiring about the frequency of speaking, he responded "Not that much. Like really silence." When I inquired about his perceptions of his own English proficiency, Iman added that he thinks he speaks "like a 40%, something like that" which is surprising because in EFL class his speech is intelligible and almost always understood. He perceives he had challenges understanding others and gave himself a rating of five on the scale of one to five but later changed it to a level two. It seems that he was trying to portray that his confusion is precipitated by different ways in which native speakers convey meaning with English vocabulary usage.

Ostensibly, being nervous about speaking is because of his concerns about how others will perceive him: "Maybe I say it wrong, or maybe I may use it wrong. May might people say use it wrong or say it wrong. Yeah." Iman did mention his concern about others laughing at his English, "because some people may laugh at me, I don't speak that much English." Strikingly, he feels that his peers are the concern for the humiliation, but adds that does not mean that they actually laugh at him. Iman responded to a follow-up inquiry about what teachers can do to help him feel more comfortable. He agreed that they could help by stating to the class that it is ok to make mistakes.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings that measured by FLCAS showed that there was a negative and moderate correlation between students' perceptions about their participation and foreign language anxiety. This negative correlation indicates that the more anxious the students perceive themselves, the less, they perceive themselves participating in classroom activities. Since the degree of the correlation was moderate and negative. This may suggest that students have to facilitate anxiety in classroom participation. As the results also showed that teachers' perceptions about students' participation were different from students' perceptions about their participation. It is difficult to explain the differences between the two perceptions. Teachers observe their students behavior every day by interacting with them and from this perspective teachers' perceptions might be true.

Another result of the study was about teachers' expectations. There was no relationship between teachers' expectations about students' participation and students' perceptions about their participation. So, this confirms the idea that students and teachers may have different ideas about participation in the classroom.

In addition, teachers' perceptions about students' participation and students' language levels correlated significantly. The results indicated that higher level students might participate more than lower level students as perceived by the teachers in classroom activities. In this study, it was teachers' opinion about students' participation and anxiety. It seems that in my study according to teachers' perceptions students become more

linguistically confident at the higher levels and students might participate more than they do it at the lower levels. So, students may not feel anxious at the higher levels and participate more than lower level students do. The findings of the study can be explained as the instructional level increase, the course material quality also increases. Students may be not anxious at the lower levels as the materials are easy to comprehend and perform.

## 5. Conclusion

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) stressed the importance of learner perceptions in reducing language anxiety, and studies of students negative correlations between anxiety and output quality indicate that anxious students have more difficulty in expressing themselves than more relaxed students. In this study students' perceptions also may or may not be consistent with their actual skill levels and they may not evaluate themselves adequately and positively as the consequence of comparing themselves to other students in the classroom.

This study explored the relationship between student perceptions about their participation and anxiety in foreign language classes. The results of this study indicate that students' perceptions are important about their participation and anxiety.

### 5.1. Implications of the study

This research is very important for teachers to evidence about the existence of anxiety in foreign language class. It also suggests having student-learning support groups where students can learn how to learn foreign languages and what to do to reduce anxiety. If teachers and students work together, they find ways to reduce anxiety then learning and teaching will be enjoyable. As a consequence, students may change their attitudes towards language learning and become more confident students.

### 5.2. Suggestions for further research

The process, results, and conclusion of the present study lead to some further lines of research of all, other studies can be done with the same objectives and aims at other proficiency levels. Anxiety is a theme for various points of view (listening anxiety; gender differences; learning styles; motivation) in terms of the foreign language learning process. There are only a few studies investigated foreign language teachers' experiences of language anxiety.

Expatriates teachers also feel anxious in their classes in presenting target language materials, interacting with students, being afraid of answering their students' questions wrongly. So, the relationship of the teachers' anxiety and foreign language instruction should be investigated. Native speakers of English cannot teach at all universities, schools, colleges in all over the world; that's why expatriates teachers teach at those institutes. In order to have confident teachers in EFL teaching, it is important to learn the reasons behind language anxiety and help them in alleviating their anxiety.

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