



The Relationship between Anxiety and Iranian EFL learners' Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT: The anxiety for EFL learners that accompanies the listening comprehension (LC) task is difficult to detect, but potentially one of the most debilitating, because in order to interact verbally the listener must first understand what is being said. With the instructional emphasis on input processing, LC anxiety merits closer examination. This study investigated the correlation between Anxiety and listening comprehension skill among Iranian EFL learners. At first, a modified version of Comprehensive English Language Test was administered to a group of 82 students to determine their homogeneity as well as to assess their language proficiency. In the next phase of the study Foreign Language listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) was modified. In the last phase of the study, the students were given a listening comprehension test consisting of two lectures to measure the listening comprehension of students. This test was designed to examine the relationship between foreign language listening anxiety and listening comprehension. The result shows anxiety and listening comprehension in English are correlated negatively.

Key words: listening comprehension, anxiety, listening anxiety.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE
Received 25 Dec. 2013
Accepted 25 Feb. 2014

INTRODUCTION

The number of foreign language learners is increasing, and foreign language educators and researchers have been putting efforts into teaching English more effectively. Along with the desire to find more effective ways of teaching English, concern over dealing with learners' negative feelings and attitudes while learning English has also increased. This concern over learners' negative feelings and attitudes is based on a few language learning theories proposed by a number of language researchers (i.e., Krashen, 1988; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999; Young, 1991). A number of factors influence foreign language learning, and anxiety when learning a foreign language has been identified as one critical factor interfering with foreign language learning and achievements (Horwitz et al., 1991). Among the many skills required to use a language (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing), listening skills are considered important for communication with others. Language learners are expected to understand what the interlocutor is saying in order to continue the conversation. When learners have difficulty with listening comprehension, it is likely that their listening anxiety will increase, which in turn will negatively affect their performance.

For the most EFL (English as a foreign language) learners, listening is the most difficult one among the four skills. Research shows that in order to be effective listeners, learners must be able to actively and strategically participate in the listening process within a low-anxiety classroom environment. Recognizing the effect of anxiety on listening is the first step; the next is to find out the sources of LC anxiety and propose

solutions. This paper analyzes the relationship between anxiety and listening comprehension. The aim of this paper is to present the sources and solutions to LC anxiety as reported by foreign language students and discusses the pedagogical implications that relate to the results.

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant relationship between anxiety and Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?
2. Do gender differences have an impact towards the level of anxiety of students?
3. Do gender differences have an impact towards the listening comprehension of students?

Research Hypothesis

1. there is a negative relationship between anxiety and Iranian EFL learner' listening comprehension.
2. Gender differences have an impact towards the level of anxiety of students.
3. Gender differences don't have an impact towards the listening comprehension.

Review of literature

Foreign Language Anxiety: As the number of English learners is constantly increasing, concern over English education has also been growing. For the last few decades, communicative language teaching with its emphasis on oral skills has been the dominant focus in second-language classrooms, especially at the beginning level of language instruction (Celce-Murcia, 2001). However, the notion of communication proficiency has evolved into being competent in all four areas—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—

and there has been an accompanying shift toward emphasizing reading and writing skills (Crandall, 1993). However, unlike English as a second language (ESL) instruction, EFL instruction in East Asian countries has focused on reading and writing for the last few decades (Fotos, 1998). Nowadays, EFL curricula also emphasize the importance of oral and listening skills in English.

Because of the focus on reading and writing in EFL education, EFL learners are extremely nervous when they have to speak with and listen to English speakers, and this interferes with the learners' improvement in speaking and listening skills. The interference with the learning experience is also related to the *-affective filter* theory suggested by Krashen (1988). This theory posits that when language learners have unpleasant and uncomfortable emotional attitudes or anxiety, it negatively affects their learning process. Reducing negative feelings while learning a language is likely to enhance learning achievements. Thus, it is important to take into consideration the language anxiety that many EFL learners experience, and teachers should help them manage such anxiety.

Language anxiety is distinguished from other types of anxiety by its association with interpersonal interactions in everyday life (Horwitz, 1986) and the social context in which people communicate with others (MacIntyre, 1995). This uniqueness of language anxiety has led language researchers to relate language anxiety and communication apprehension (Foss and Reitzel, 1988). Because language learning involves interaction with others, a language learner's communication ability is hindered in the presence of nervousness and fear when interacting with others. This relationship supports the argument that research on language anxiety should be in conjunction with communication apprehension, which is defined as having fear or anxiety when communicating with others. Furthermore, as Young (1991) asserted, knowing about language anxiety helps educators understand how students learn language and how they can help students manage the stress that accompanies language anxiety.

Language anxiety is frequently found in oral activities in foreign language classrooms, and a number of language researchers have focused on the relationship between oral proficiency and anxiety (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 1986; Mejias et al., 1991). However, other studies have revealed the effects of anxiety in other language skills such as reading (Saito et al., 1999; Seller, 2000), writing (Argaman and Abu-Rabia, 2002; Chenget al., 1999), and listening (Kim, 2000). Compared to speaking anxiety, other kinds of language anxiety have rarely been studied. There is a particular paucity of research in

listening anxiety (Elkhafaifi, 2005), defined as nervousness and fear of listening in a foreign language. This is mostly because current EFL instruction focuses on testing EFL learners' comprehension rather than helping them improve their language skills (Phillips, 1992).

Anxiety in listening comprehension: Research in foreign or second language learning has begun to show that anxiety directly undermines motivation and creates a negative affective response to the foreign language being studied (Gardner et al. 1987). Therefore, addressing foreign language listening comprehension anxiety is fast becoming a priority in the classroom.

In most of the literature on language learning anxiety, students have reported that speaking in the foreign language produces the most anxiety (Young 1990; Phillips 1992). Slowly within the studies of speaking anxiety, listening comprehension (LC) anxiety has begun to surface as a problematic area for students. Krashen (in Young 1992) acknowledged that, although speaking is cited as the most anxiety-producing skill, LC is also "highly anxiety provoking if it is incomprehensible" (168).

According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992), listening anxiety occurs when students feel they are faced with a task that is too difficult or unfamiliar to them. This anxiety is exacerbated if the

listeners are under the false impression that they must understand every word they hear. Many Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) show that the most negative element that influences the language performance is anxiety. The anxiety that accompanies the LC task is the one that is most easily ignored because the goal of most classroom activities focuses on the speaking skill. When considered a stepping-stone to speaking, LC is more often than not treated as a passive skill that will "happen" during the regular classroom activities. With speaking, teachers anticipate anxiety on the part of the students and expect them to stumble and hesitate. To remedy the situation, teachers engage in all kinds of structured practice designed to help the students overcome their fear of speaking. LC anxiety can undermine speech production because, in order to interact verbally, the listener must first understand what is being said. Therefore, LC anxiety should not be ignored, but actively addressed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: Survey data were collected from 62 students from three institutes in Naghadeh including Sadaf institution, Danial institution, and Ertebatat institution. First of all, 82 male and female students in intermediate level were chosen. Then a

Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT) was used. The reason for the administration of such a standardized test was to evaluate the proficiency level of the subjects as well as to select a homogeneous sample. Of the 82 participants, only 68 were found to be homogenous. 6 subjects could not take part in one or both of listening tests and were excluded from the study. 62 main participants who took part in all phases of the research were both male and female and in an age group 18 to 22.

Instrumentation: To achieve the purpose of the present study, while controlling for the differences in the participants' level of language proficiency, the researcher utilized the following instruments:

Language Proficiency Test: A modified version of a language proficiency test, Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT), consisting of 54 items, was selected to investigate whether the participants were homogeneous in terms of their general language proficiency. The test was piloted to 82 intermediate students at different institutes of Naghadeh. This group was almost similar to the target group regarding their language proficiency level, gender, and age.

Foreign language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS): Students' listening anxiety levels were measured by using the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) developed by Elkhafaifi (2005), which was reported to be reliable, with a coefficient of .96 ($n = 233$) for internal consistency. Also, Elkhafaifi's study using this listening anxiety scale was published in *The Modern Language Journal*, one of the top journals in foreign language education, which ensures the face validity of the scale. For the present study, a 5-point Likert scale was used to measure students' listening anxiety, with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree* for each question on the scale; thus a lower score indicated a lower level of anxiety whereas a higher score indicated a higher level of anxiety. There were 20 question items on the scale.

Listening Comprehension Tests: Since this study is concerned with the listening strategies learners use in the academic setting, the listening test constructed for this study was comprised of two lectures to measure listening comprehension. The two

In order to analyze and interpret the data, descriptive and inferential statistics has been used (table 1).

H1: There is a negative significance relationship between anxiety and Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. The Correlations of these variables including anxiety and listening comprehension are computed through Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The correlation coefficient between anxiety and listening comprehension is -0.32

lectures varied immensely in length and topics discussed. One of the lectures is only three minutes long. It was made sure that the lecture did not contain any technical terminology that could make the comprehension of the lecture overly challenging to the participants. The comprehension of this lecture was measured using a test, in which the subtests were comprised of four items with four potential choices, and an essay question that was focused on the recognition of the main idea of the lecture. The other lecture is about 9: 35 minutes long. The comprehension of this lecture was measured using five inferential essay questions that centered on the recognition of the main ideas and key supporting details in the lecture.

Procedure: The following steps were taken to determine whether there is any significant relationship among creativity and written narrative performance.

Administration of the Language Proficiency Test: In this stage, the modified version of the Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT) was administered to the participants to ensure that there was no significant difference between them regarding their language proficiency level.

Administration of the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale: In this stage, Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale (FLLAS) was administered to the participants. The participants were asked to complete information about name and age on the papers in order to be identified in the other stages of the study. They were also notified that all tests and scales of this study would have no influence on their institute-related achievements.

Administration the listening comprehension tasks: The two lectures were played on a CD player as many as twice. In the first listen, participants were asked to take notes, which they later used to help them answer the questions. Then, they were administered the questions and allotted five minutes to answer the questions. After that, they listened to the same lecture and answered the questions that they had not been able to answer using their notes from the first listen. The same procedure was followed with the second lecture.

RESULTS

in error level of 0.01 and certainty level of 0.99 and with regard to level of significance at 0.05, because the correlation coefficient is higher than level of significance, we concluded that there is a negative significance relationship between anxiety and Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension, which show that the higher level of anxiety, the lower level of listening comprehension, and converse.

H01. There is no significant relationship between anxiety and gender of students.

By computing T_test for males and females we concluded that there is a significant relationship between anxiety and gender, it means that females' anxiety is higher than males' anxiety.

H02. There is no significant relationship between listening comprehension and gender of students.

By computing T_test for males and females we concluded that there is no significant relationship

between males and females in listening comprehension, so we accepted the null hypothesis.

In order to determine the level of anxiety on listening comprehension, Regression method has been used. The results showed that the effect of anxiety on listening comprehension is positive and significant ($r= 0.73, p < 0.001, df= 60, f= 7.277$).

Table 1. Study variables descriptive statistic

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	V	Rang
Anxiety	62	90.23	86.00	82	8.601	73.981	28
Listening comprehension	62	49.31	47.50	44	5.278	27.855	21

Table2. Correlation coefficients

Group	Variables		anxiety	Listening comprehension
females	anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	.443*
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.012
		N	31	31
	Listening comprehension	Pearson Correlation	.443*	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	
		N	31	31
males	anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	.192
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.301
		N	31	31
	Listening comprehension	Pearson Correlation	-.0192	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	-.0341	
		N	31	31

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Group statistics

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
anxiety	female	31	90.4194	8.93224	1.60428
	male	31	88.0323	7.40033	1.50874
Listening comprehension	female	31	49.4839	5.60280	1.00629
	male	31	49.1290	5.01825	.90130

Table 4. T-test for Equality of Means

Variable	Group	T value	DF	Sig.
Anxiety	Male	0.86	60	0.176
	Female			
Listening comprehension	Male	0.79	60	0.26
	Female			

Table 5. Model summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	Change Statistics				
					R ²	F	df1	df2	Sig.
1	.733 ^a	.711	.709	8.190	.108	7.277	1	60	.009

DISCUSSION

Anxiety is the important factor that affects the LC ability of successful students. We should decrease listening comprehension anxiety by increasing self-confidence in the FL classroom. Listening comprehension activities that address listening anxiety will empower both the teacher and the learner. When teachers and students make the shift from listening for correctness to listening for a message, the motivation to understand increases and the fear of being "wrong" decreases. Learners that are motivated to listen and learn will have positive attitudes toward the target language and its speakers. Based on study results it's recommended:

1. Make input comprehensible: A listener who has experienced success in simple comprehension tasks is more likely to have the necessary self-confidence to adopt these active listening tactics. In contrast, if learners have been exposed to listening materials that are so difficult as to be incomprehensible, they suffer in two ways: not only is the whole experience a dispiriting one, but it is also likely to encourage passive and unsuccessful listening habits where the learners equate „listening" with sitting back and letting a largely meaningless sequence of sounds wash over them.

Effective listeners seemed to be aware when they stopped attending and made an effort to redirect their attention to the task and ineffective listeners, when faced with loss of comprehension, they usually just stopped listening or failed to be aware or their inattention. The relationship between self-confidence and performance is also reflected in the results of a study by Fujita (1984), who found that self-confidence was considered one of the major factors affecting the LC ability of successful students.

2. Select material of appropriate interest level. Students perform better with material they want to listen to because they enjoy it. Apart from catering for any specialist interests you may know about, you should find the following generally useful: jokes, personal anecdotes, human interest stories, material containing some puzzle to be solved, and serialized stories.

3. Use your prior knowledge of the material to guide the listeners. This may be done in two ways:

a) You can introduce the topic with a short discussion; for example you could announce the title or say the first sentence and ask what they think it will be about. This arouses certain expectations and makes the students mentally prepared for the topic; it may also activate latent knowledge of vocabulary associated with the topic.

b) Perhaps most important of all, you can help students to be selective by giving them a purpose for

listening. Give a few questions before the first hearing, or ask them to pick out the 3 main points, or the main steps in a process. Set tasks which entail concentrating on certain features and filtering out irrelevant information.

4) Select material at an appropriate level of linguistic difficulty as regards syntax and vocabulary.

5. Control the length of the material: Listening exercises should be shorter than reading texts, especially in the earlier stages. If you want to use a longer exercise, split it up into short sections and ask questions appropriate to each short section as you go along.

6. Repeat the material: This is obvious but needs to be done with care. In most target situations material will be heard only once. It is, therefore, a good idea to give students something specific to listen for, even on first hearing to prove that they can get some information from a single hearing. It is amazing how often students are prepared to listen to the same thing over and over again provided that they are given a good reason for doing so, like trying to answer specific questions or solving some sort of problem. Listeners at lower levels of proficiency seem to find that a simple repetition of a noun phrase is the easiest to comprehend; more advanced learners can cope with both pronouns and varied nouns descriptions (Chaudron 1983).

7. Control the speed of delivery and clarity of diction: This again is obvious but it is very easy to take it too far. Students who will eventually have to listen to speech at full speed and with native speaker fluency (with short forms, unstressed words, etc) should be weaned off careful, slow speech as quickly as possible. Another important reason for not going too slowly is that in very slow speech the useful cues to grammatical relationships provided by intonation are obscured, and extremely slow speech actually places a greater burden on the STM because by the time the voice reaches the end of a sentence the learner may have forgotten how it started. If you want to make things easier in the early stages by controlling speed, it is better to deliver each sentence at a moderate speed but pause rather longer than you normally would, between sentences. This gives the listener a little more time to process the information without distorting the normal speech patterns.

8. Be understanding and sensitive to student fears about LC and FL learning: According to McKeachie (1994), an important instructor characteristic that can go a long way in relieving personal anxiety is a sympathetic attitude towards the problems and fears of the students. An important step, therefore, is to create a positive, non-threatening atmosphere within the classroom. The climate of the classroom is

directly related to the attitudes, expectations, and physical presence of the instructor, which, in turn, determine the way in which the instructor and students interact. If we want students to experience success in FL learning, we must not ignore their beliefs, perceptions, fears, obstacles and anxieties.

One way to expose students' fears about FL learning, and LC in particular, would be to have them list the sources of LC anxiety on the board. Students would see that listening anxiety is shared by nearly everyone and that most of the other students experience similar fears of failure. Knowing that others share their beliefs can motivate the students to overcome their own anxiety.

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