

Correlates of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: The Role of Learned Helplessness and Teacher Motivational Support

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Abstract

In this study, the correlations between foreign language classroom anxiety, learned helplessness, and teacher motivational support were examined. Findings showed that foreign language classroom anxiety is moderately correlated with learned helplessness and disliking teacher. Regression analysis showed that learned helplessness and teacher motivational support explain 19% of the variance in foreign language classroom anxiety.

Keywords

Foreign language classroom anxiety, learned helplessness, teacher motivational support

1 | Introduction

Many scholars believe that foreign language learning can be a stressful endeavor, and thus many researchers have examined the role of anxiety in foreign language learning (Khodaday & Khajavy, 2013). However, few researchers have examined the antecedents and factors that contribute to foreign language classroom anxiety. Foreign language anxiety is defined as “worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 27). Foreign language classroom anxiety is viewed as an obstacle in foreign language learning and a cause of lower achievement in foreign language learning which is sometimes attributed to anxiety and other negative emotions (MacIntyre, 1999, 2002).

In psychology, *learned helplessness* refers to a condition in which individuals feel that they have no control over the undesirable things that happen around them and give up trying to change the situation and finally accept their fate. In animal psychology, when an animal is faced with a difficult condition and cannot escape the situation, it stops trying and feels helpless, even when the opportunity to escape is provided (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2011).

The term learned helplessness was originally introduced in animal psychology but has recently been extended to human behavior as well especially in the school context. A student who repeatedly gets poor grades, for example, in English will later feel that he cannot do anything to improve his English test performance and will have a sense of helplessness. Research has shown that learned helplessness is linked with anxiety, depression, shyness, and loneliness (Maier & Seligman, 2016). In educational settings, students who suffer from learned helplessness often avoid tasks and academic challenges, and eventually come to believe that they will not succeed (Woolfolk, 2007).

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To prevent learned helplessness in school contexts, Ackerman (2018) advises to provide praise and encouragements based on students' abilities and efforts. She further advised to set small achievable goals and help students achieve the goals to teach them that outcomes are achievable and under their control. Teachers can provide motivational support for their students in the school context (Raufelder et al., 2013). The literature shows that students who perceive their teachers as positive motivators are more motivated and experience increased achievement drive and goal orientation. On the other hand, students who perceive lower levels of teacher support experience higher levels of sadness and helplessness (Carson et al., 2002). Therefore, teacher behavior is an important factor in students' emotional states such as anxiety. This shows that the teacher is "a powerful figure with the potential to attenuate students' learned helplessness and detrimental test anxiety through positive motivation" (Raufelder et al., 2018, p. 58). The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between learned helplessness, teacher motivational support, and foreign language classroom anxiety among Iranian university EFL learners. The literature shows that learned helplessness is associated with anxiety but teachers' motivational support can mitigate it (Raufelder et al., 2018). Therefore, the researcher aimed to test this hypothesis.

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants

The sample of the current study included Iranian EFL students in Mashhad at public high school. The participants of this study including 200 students of both gender (100 females and 100 males) through cross-sectional survey. Their age range was 17-18 years old at the level of upper intermediate. From among the 100 female participants, 50 were at the age of 17 and another 50 were at the age of 18. Likewise, the male participants also included 50 learners at the age of 17 and 50 at the age of 18. The rationale behind selecting an equal number of male and female participants in the same age range was to neutralize the effects of age and gender as intervening variables in the present study. All the participants spoke Persian as their mother tongue. The participants were selected based on convenience sampling as selecting the participants based on pure randomized procedures was not feasible.

2.2 | Instrument

2.2.1 | Teacher and Motivation (TEMO) Scale

To measure the motivational support provided by teachers, the Teacher and Motivation Scale (TEMO; Raufelder & Hoferichter, 2015) was used. The questionnaire has 16 items with four subscales including: student's motivation based on liking the teacher, student's motivation based on teacher's commitment, student's motivation based on disliking the teacher, and student's motivation based on the teacher's lack of commitment. Following Raufelder and Hoferichter (2015), the subscales of student's motivation based on liking the teacher and student's motivation based on teacher's commitment were combined into a scale named *liked teacher as motivator* (L-TEMO) and the subscale of student's motivation based on disliking the teacher and student's motivation based on the teacher's lack of commitment were combined into a scale named *disliked teacher as motivator* (D-TEMO). To assure that the questionnaire yielded reliable scores, it was translated into Persian to remove the possibility of any sort of ambiguity and confusion. It was also back-translated into English by two experts in translation field to determine the extent of translation equivalence and precision.

2.2.2 | Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986) was used in the current study to measure classroom anxiety. FLCAS contains 33 items where respondents are asked to rate themselves on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) such that a higher score indicates a higher level of foreign language classroom anxiety. The researcher employed the Persian version of the questionnaire translated and validated by Khodaday and Khajavy (2013).

2.2.3 / Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS)

The Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS) employed in the present study was originally developed by [Quinless et al. \(1988\)](#). The scale contained 20 items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. To make sure that this instrument produced reliable scores, it was translated into Persian to remove the possibility of any sort of ambiguity and confusion and was optimized through the process of back translation by the researcher.

3 | Results

The present research utilized as a cross-sectional survey. The reason was that, based on [Hatch and Lazaraton \(1991\)](#), there was no treatment involved in the study, nor was the study concerned with the learning process the participants might have gone through as a significant factor. No control was implemented over the effect of independent variables of the study on the dependent variable. None of the variables of the study were manipulated to cause changes, either. What was of paramount importance was the type and strength of the connection between variables of the study; therefore, the Correlational survey was the appropriate design for the accomplishment of the purpose of the study. Data analysis for the current study was conducted using regression and also was conducted using the program Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics for learned helplessness, foreign language classroom anxiety, and motivational support were also calculated. The items of these three questionnaires were on a Likert scale.

As the first step, Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the scales were examined. The alphas for the FLCAS, LHS, L-TEMO, and D-TEMO were 0.91, 0.87, 0.90, and 0.90, respectively. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the scales of the study.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	FLCAS	LHS	L-TEMO	D-TEMO
Mean	130.70	42.23	22.14	20.10
Median	130.50	42.00	23.00	20.00
Mode	142.00	50.00	20.00	20.00
SD	34.93	10.13	6.42	6.59
Variance	1220.36	102.63	41.16	43.48
Min	53.00	21.00	8.00	8.00
Max	224.00	77.00	32.00	32.00

Note. SD = Standard Deviation

Table 2 shows the matrix of correlations between the variables. As Table 2 shows, classroom anxiety is positively related to learned helplessness and Disliked teacher as motivator, although it is negatively associated with Liked teacher as motivator.

Table 2

Correlations among the Variables

	FLCAS	LHS	L-TEMO	D-TEMO
FLCAS	1	0.35**	-0.18**	0.32**
LHS		1	0.02	0.20**
L-TEMO			1	-0.30**

Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Regression analysis was employed to evaluate the contribution of teachers' motivational support and learned helplessness to classroom anxiety. Results showed that the model explains a small but significant portion of the variance in the FLCAS scores $F(3,196) = 16.78$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.204$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.192$. That is, the three independent variables explain about 19% of the variability in the FLCAS scores.

Table 3 shows the Beta weights, their t -values, and significance of the independent variables. As Table 3 shows, the helplessness and dislike teacher as motivator significantly contribute to foreign language classroom anxiety, while motivation based on liking the teacher does not contribute to (reducing) classroom anxiety.

Table 3

Results of Regression Analysis

	Beta	t	p	Partial	Part
Constant		5.30	0.00		
L-TEMO	-0.12	-1.82	0.07	0.129	-0.116
D-TEMO	0.22	3.20	0.002	0.223	0.204
LHS	0.31	4.76	0.00	0.322	0.304

4 | Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that foreign language classroom anxiety is moderately correlated with learned helplessness and teacher motivational support. The direction of correlations indicated that students' anxiety increases when they face negative motivation and decrease with supportive motivation. The findings further showed that disliking teacher has a stronger correlation with foreign language classroom anxiety than linking teacher. In other words, disliking teacher is a stronger predictor of classroom anxiety than linking teacher. Obviously, one should avoid making causal statements about correlations. Nevertheless, if teachers are indeed causes of anxiety, disliking teacher is a stronger reason for anxiety than liking teacher for reducing it. Multiple regression analysis showed that only learned helplessness and disliking teacher significantly explain foreign language classroom anxiety.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statements

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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