

# Investigating the Relationship between Language Skills Anxiety and Foreign Language Learning Aptitude among Iranian EFL Learners

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## ABSTRACT

The rationale behind this study is that though poor achievement is attributable to the negative effects of anxiety which is said to interfere with cognitive processes, the importance of foreign language learning aptitude which may have confounded the issue, has been misinterpreted. Thus, the main aim of this study was to see if a significant relationship existed between skill-based anxieties and language learning aptitude of Iranian EFL learners. To this effect, 240 EFL learners studying English in three language institutes from the upper intermediate and advanced proficiency levels were selected based on convenient nonrandom sampling procedure. They completed the LLAMA, FLLAS, FLSAS, FLRAS and the FLWAS self-report questionnaires. Their relationships were analyzed using the Spearman rank order coefficient of correlation, which is a non-parametric formula. The results indicated that a statistically significant relationship existed between language aptitude and all the specific skill- based anxieties of Iranian EFL learners. Interestingly, the results also showed that the significance in the relationship between the EFL learners' language aptitude and reading anxiety was comparative lower than that of the other three skill-based anxieties. Thus, this study identifies another important contributing factor of skill-based anxieties in the EFL context to probably be learners' foreign language aptitude. This study not only provides statistical evidence of the relationship among these variables but it also stresses the importance of EFL learners' language aptitude to their skill-based anxieties.

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## 1. Introduction

It is a common belief that learners vary enormously in how successful they are in learning a language, be it their mother tongue or their first language. They may vary in their rates of learning or their levels of achievement (Ellis, 2008). However, when it comes to learning a foreign language, many other factors come into play that determine the outcomes of the learning process. Apart from those factors that influence the acquisition of a foreign language in general (namely the role of the language environment, the role of input, the role of the first language and internal processing (Eddy, 2011), there is a set of such influences that vary from one learner to another and differ according to a learner's inner characteristics. Broadly speaking, these individual differences, according to Dörnyei, (2005) are long-lasting personal characteristics which are believed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree.

Among the individual differences, researchers such as Gardner (1992) and Macintyre (1993) have reiterated that both cognitive variables and affective variables play important roles in language learning. The aptitude variable is said to be, "Specific abilities thought to predict success in language learning" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). According to these researchers, a learner who's got aptitude for a language, learns considerably more quickly than the ones without such aptitude. Among the affective variables, language anxiety is another variable that has been seen to influence second and foreign language achievement and proficiency. Broadly speaking, anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983). Anxiety when associated with learning a foreign language is termed as "foreign language anxiety" (FLA) related to the negative emotional reactions of the learners towards foreign language acquisition (Horwitz, 2001).

Thus, it can be seen that within the cognitive and affective domains that influence language learning, both language aptitude and language anxiety have been the focus of study for many years now. However, it should be mentioned here that, many related studies were conducted within their domains and compared with language learning achievement separately. Although empirical findings have supported the negative relationship between language anxiety

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and achievement, interpretations of the results have sparked controversies. In other words, the claim that poor achievement is attributable to the negative effects of anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Macintyre & Gardner, 1994) is contested by the claim that these studies and interpretations did not consider other language variables such as native language learning skills and foreign language learning aptitude which may have confounded the issue (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991, 2007; Sparks & Patton, 2013). They are of the opinion that success or failure in L2 learning is primarily dependent on one's language learning ability / aptitude (i.e. cognitive linguistics skills) rather than on just the negative effects of anxiety. Since not much empirical studies have been conducted to support this view, research on these two important individual learner differences is warranted especially due to their inherent controversy on their relationship and their influence on learning outcomes.

The primary goal of this research was to see if there exists a relationship between EFL learners' overall foreign language aptitude and their skill-based anxieties as perceived by these students. It is an attempt to better understand if a learner's level of language aptitude is related to levels of anxiety he/she faces in the process of learning each specific skill in foreign language classes. This study also aimed to pay detail attention to differences between skill-based anxiety levels and language learning aptitude in EFL classes using individual anxiety scales for each skill and an aptitude measurement which is rare in the EFL context.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample chosen as the subset of the population involved in this study consisted of EFL learners currently participating in regular EFL classes in different language institutes spread over various regions in Tehran province. This is important for this study as one of the aims of this study was to find out if EFL learners showed any statistically significant relationship between their levels of skill-based anxieties and their language aptitude and choosing participants from various venues would provide a more reliable result.

Besides, the potential participants approached were those in the higher language proficiency levels for ease of comprehension of and response to the language skills anxiety scales and the aptitude questionnaire. These consisted of EFL learners from the upper-intermediate and advance levels.

### 2.2. Instrumentation

The following instruments were utilized to collect the pertinent data in the present study: (a) LLAMA language aptitude test by Meara (2005), (b) Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale by Pae (2013), (c) Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale by Pae (2013) (d) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale by Pae (2013) and (e) Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale by Pae (2013).

### 2.3. Procedure

Subsequent to the successful conclusion of the pilot study, permission and informed consent of the samples of the study were sought and obtained from the administrators in each setting before conducting the actual study. Considering the aim of this study, 240 upper-intermediate and advanced levels learners from intact English language classes willingly and freely agreed to participate in the study. Data collection for each language skill anxiety scale was carried out in five sessions involving 10 to 15 learners in each class which lasted about six weeks. Each language skill anxiety scale was administered at the end of the class time after they had been taught that specific skill in each session. In addition, those participants who responded to all the language skills anxiety scale were given LLAMA language aptitude test program which was written on CDs to run on their computers or laptops at their home. It should be mentioned that data was automatically saved to the LlamaDat. Txt file, this is a simple text file that records the scores of any test user. Then, the participants submitted a copy of stored data to the researcher for data analysis.

## 3. Results

The resultant data analysis are presented as per the research Null Hypotheses.

**H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant relationship between language learning aptitude and listening anxiety among Iranian EFL learners.**

To test the first null hypothesis, the relevant data was analyzed using the Spearman rank order coefficient of correlation which is a non-parametric formula. Table 1 shows the result of this analysis.

**Table 1. Spearman's Correlation between Language Aptitude and Listening Anxiety**

			Aptitude	Listening
Spearman's rho	Aptitude	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.707**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	220	220
	Listening	Correlation Coefficient	-.707**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	220	220
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

According to the results of the analysis reported in Table 1, it was concluded that there was a significant and negative correlation between language aptitude and listening anxiety,  $\rho = -.71$ ,  $n = 220$ ,  $p < .01$ , and high levels of language aptitude were associated with low levels of listening anxiety. This signified a large effect size. Thus, the first null hypotheses was rejected.

**H0<sub>2</sub>: There is no significant relationship between language learning aptitude and speaking anxiety among Iranian EFL learners.**

This second null hypothesis was also tested by analyzing the relevant data using the Spearman rank order coefficient of correlation. Table 2 shows the result of this analysis.

**Table 2. Spearman's Correlation between Language Aptitude and Speaking Anxiety**

Table 2: Spearman's Correlation between Language Aptitude and Speaking Anxiety				
			Aptitude	Speaking
Spearman's rho	Aptitude	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.555**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	220	220
	Speaking	Correlation Coefficient	-.555**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	220	220
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

According to the results of the analysis reported in Table 2, it was concluded that there was a significant and negative correlation between language aptitude and speaking anxiety,  $\rho = -.56$ ,  $n = 220$ ,  $p < .01$ , and high levels of language aptitude were associated with low levels of speaking anxiety. This signified a large effect size. Thus, the second null hypothesis was also rejected.

**H0<sub>3</sub>: There is no significant relationship between language learning aptitude and reading anxiety among Iranian EFL learners.**

In order to test the third null hypothesis, the data was analyzed using the Spearman rank order coefficient of correlation. Table 3 shows the result of this analysis.

**Table 3. Spearman's Correlation between Language Aptitude and Reading Anxiety**

			Aptitude	Reading
Spearman's rho	Aptitude	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.486**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	220	220
	Reading	Correlation Coefficient	-.486**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	220	220
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

According to the results of the analysis reported in Table 3., it was concluded that there was a significant and negative correlation between language aptitude and reading anxiety,  $\rho = -.49$ ,  $n = 220$ ,  $p < .01$ , and high levels of language aptitude were associated with low levels of reading anxiety. This signified a medium effect size. Thus, the third null hypothesis was also rejected.

**H0<sub>4</sub>: There is no significant relationship between language learning aptitude and writing anxiety among Iranian EFL learners.**

In order to test the last null hypothesis, the data was analyzed using the Spearman rank order coefficient of correlation. Table 4 shows the result of this analysis.

**Table 4. Spearman's Correlation between Language Aptitude and Writing Anxiety**

			Aptitude	Writing
Spearman's rho	Aptitude	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.500**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	220	220
	Writing	Correlation Coefficient	-.500**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.

		N	220	220
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

According to the results of the analysis reported in Table 4, it was concluded that there was a significant and negative correlation between language aptitude and writing anxiety,  $p = -.50$ ,  $n = 220$ ,  $p < .01$ , and high levels of language aptitude were associated with low levels of writing anxiety. This signified a large effect size. Thus, the fourth null hypothesis was also rejected.

#### 4. Discussion

Drawing on the above-mentioned result that indicated there was a significant and negative correlation between language aptitude and all of the skill-based anxieties, it could be concluded that aptitude can affect anxiety, or vice-versa, across all skills training in EFL classes in Iran. To be exact, it is seen that the higher the aptitude, the lower the anxiety and this holds true with all the language skills. This result seems logical and this study that aimed to seek this relationship may be questioned. To support the aim of this study, the premise behind this study which was explained in chapter one should be revisited here.

Firstly, it was mentioned that in the EFL context, besides the rate of learning and level of achievement, learners' individual differences (ID) or learner's inner characteristics (Eddy, 2011) are said to influence language acquisition. The two main categories of ID (Gardner, 1992; Macintyre, 1993) are called the Cognitive and Affective domains. Within the affective domain, much research done pointed to the conclusion that anxiety (Affective Filter) causes interferences to the cognitive process (Cognitive Interference Hypothesis) that eventually affects achievement (Horwitz, 2001; Macintyre & Gardner, 1994). However, controversial studies (Sparks & Ganschow; 1991, 2007; Sparks & Patton, 2013) emphasized the neglected role of aptitude in this anxiety-achievement interpretation. Thus, a study on the relationship between these two variables seemed necessary, especially in the Iranian EFL context, where a lack in relevant literature exists. Furthermore, to add to the literature, differences in the relationship between these two across all language learning skills were also deemed important.

The main conclusion gained through the findings of this study is that Foreign Language Aptitude is an important construct by itself and can affect anxiety and ultimately, affect the success or failure in language achievement. Thus, it is a construct to that should be considered independently when dealing with its role in language learning success. Also, it can be concluded that since there is a strong relationship between one's aptitude and anxiety level, which is constant across almost all language skills (except for the reading skill which showed a moderate relationship), focus on modifying it through training can go a long way to improve learning outcomes. It can also be concluded that aptitude in the reading skill does not play as important a role in the raising or lowering of anxiety levels (or vice-versa) as it does in the other language skills. These are the contributions of this study.

#### 5. Contribution

The main contribution of this study is the conclusion gained that Foreign Language Aptitude is an important construct by itself and can affect anxiety and ultimately, affect the success or failure in language achievement. Thus, it is a construct to that should be considered independently when dealing with its role in language learning success. Also, the study added to the existing literature on this context by concluding that since there is a strong relationship between one's aptitude and anxiety level, which is constant across almost all language skills (except for the reading skill which showed a moderate relationship), focus on modifying it through training can go a long way to improve learning outcomes. The last but most interesting contribution is the conclusion that aptitude in the reading skill does not play as important a role in the raising or lowering of anxiety levels (or vice-versa) as it does in the other language skills.

#### 6. Implications

First of all, it is hoped that this results of this study would encourage teachers to research about the ways to modify aptitude in foreign language learning to help reduce skill-based anxieties. As a result, the English classroom will better benefit the students' English language learning. Teachers could focus on the four components of foreign language that are related to aptitude. They could prepare exercises to be practiced in classes to improve vocabulary learning, phonetic memory, sound-symbol correspondence and grammatical inferencing if the text book they are using does not sufficiently cover these activities.

In the Iranian EFL context, language institute managements do not usually allow flexibility in teaching methods. Thus, teachers could spend more time on exercises in the text books that focuses on improving language aptitude wherever he/she senses related learner anxiety. In order to identify when and where anxiety is perceived, the students could be encouraged to share their likes and dislikes in the learning process. Also, the teachers are advised to play the authentic listening materials as much as possible as a part of training learners in language aptitude.

Moreover, English teachers are expected to be familiar with the concept of anxiety and try to decrease the anxiety level of their learners, as well. As language teachers, it is their responsibility to create a language learning atmosphere which does not result in unnecessarily high levels of anxiety or stress. Teachers should inform students that anxiety, though inevitable, is to some extent positive and facilitative; and if it goes beyond a certain limit, it could be negative and debilitating, both of which are almost inevitable in language learning. If underachievers are found to be anxious, students should be provided with some strategies to cope with anxiety-provoking situations appropriately (Scovel, 1991). Of course anxiety due to low aptitude in learners cannot be

identified without proper related tools but teachers could easily find out if learners face problems in any of the four components of foreign language that are mentioned through individual feedback while doing related exercises.

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