

# The Effect of Self Esteem and Language Anxiety on Learning English as a Foreign Language

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## Abstract

In the field of a foreign language acquisition, there are many affective factors that play crucial roles on language learning and teaching processes. Foreign language anxiety and learners' self-esteem reflect their responses to language learning contexts. So exploring those factors and variables are crucial in learning context. Consequently, this study tries to investigate the extent to what the Jordanian university students are anxious in English language class and their level of self-esteem. Moreover, it tries to investigate if there is any statistically significant correlation between the students' foreign language anxiety, and self-esteem. A sample of the study consists of 50 EFL students studying at ANU for the academic year 2022. They are chosen purposefully from two classes of English language skills course, Level one with 25 students each. To achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher used these scales as instruments used by the researcher: The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986) and the Self-Esteem Scale which developed by Rosenberg (1965). The results of the study revealed that the overall degree for the students' anxiety is moderate. Furthermore, the current findings indicated that there isn't any significant correlation between language anxiety and self-esteem among the learners in EFL classes.

**Keywords:** anxiety, self-esteem, foreign language, acquisition, performance

## 1. Introduction

Language is a system that consists of acquisition, development, maintenance and use of complex systems of communication. We cannot deny that English language is a global language the essential language worldwide. English language acquisition, which considered as the highest level in the lexicological hierarchy, has an effective role in educational institutions and in any teaching context.

Any language acquisition takes into consideration cognitive, personality, demographic and affective aspects to help students achieve competence in the target language. The affective factor of language learning involves various aspects of emotion, feeling, motivation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, attitudes and so on. All these affective variables may influence the learners' language learning process positively or negatively. Plax and Kearney (1996, 297) explain, "Affect is by definition, an intrinsic motivator; positive affect sustains involvement and deepens interest in the subject matter". Those variables can make learning process more effectively and they are essential for learning to occur. Skehan (1989) indicated also that affective variables are considered as the most important variables in the language learning. Those factors are motivation, age, ego, intelligence, personality, attitude, gender, anxiety, and so on. Many researchers have indicated that language learning proficiency can be seen as an anxiety-provoking experience for EFL learners (MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Rubio 2004). Omaggio (2001, pp. 90-91) also stated that

*"Proficiency oriented approaches should respond to the affective needs of students as well as to their cognitive needs. Students should feel motivated to learn and must be given opportunities to express their own meanings in a non-threatening environment"*.

Omaggio believes that affective variables are conducive to the improvement and development of proficiency when they are taken into consideration in the foreign language curriculum. Brown, (2000, p. 60) indicated that affective principles which include the following: language ego, self-confidence, risk-taking, and the language-culture connection have essential effects on language acquisition.

Most foreign language learners face many challenges in their classrooms. One of these challenges comes from the learners' cognitive, personality, demographic and affective factors, i.e., self-confidence, anxiety, ego etc... Anxiety is considered as one of the most negatively affective factors which prevents learners from successful learning and acquisition of a foreign language. Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p.128). Young (1991) defined anxiety of learning a foreign language as "worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 27).

Many researchers studied the effect of this variable on language development and student's achievements. Some of these researches and studies revealed that students, who have a high level of anxiety, have a negative impact on their foreign language performance (Gregersen, T., 2003; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; Price, 1991). Saito & Samimy (1996) assert that anxiety

has a significant impact on language learning and achievement because it makes learners who learn a foreign language afraid that they may demonstrate performance in the language learning process.

Anxiety as a negative factor may take control on how someone deals with learning. Brown (2007), Liu & Huang (2011) and Samimy & Rardin, (1994) point out that anxiety is considered as one of the most powerful affective predictors of learners' language performance and competence. They agree that anxiety could be a negative and a complex phenomenon and predictor of EFL learners' achievements because anxiety is influenced by many factors, including relatives, friends, classmates, and interactions with those that have social and cultural differences.

Horwitz (1986) also categorize anxiety-provoking sources into three classes: the first class relates to the fear of communicating with other people (Communication apprehension). The second class refers to the fear of assessment strategies used to evaluate students' quizzes, exams and other assignments (Test anxiety) while the third class refers to the apprehension about others' evaluation (negative evaluation).

Self-esteem is another affective variable that has a strong influence on a person's daily life. When there is low self-esteem, there will be some kind of fear, social distance and insecurity. Coopersmith (1967) describes self-esteem as follows: *"By self-esteem we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy."* (4-5)

In the language classroom, self-esteem as an affective variable that influences learners' performance and language achievements. Dealing with self-esteem can lead to positive beliefs in the learners themselves and their skills and abilities. When students are trying to learn a foreign language, the self-esteem is especially vulnerable. Arnold and Brown (1999, 21-22) confirm that language shock will take place when students fear that their target language does not reflect their ideas effectively. There is a general agreement among researchers (Harter 1983; Beane and Lipka 1984; Solley and Stagner 1956; Covington 1989; Klein and Keller 1990; Rennie 1991; Auer 1992; Benham 1993; Lawrence 1996; Lerner 1996) that there is a direct positive correlation between learners' self-esteem towards learning a foreign language and their learning success. Language learners should have high self-esteem in order to value their roles in the classroom. Here it can be said that different affective variables stem from learners' personality and definition of their roles in the classroom. Second or foreign language acquisition depends on learner differences such as age, sex, cognitive style, motivation, aptitude, personality, and learning strategies. Because the main focus in an effective language classroom will be changed from focusing on the teacher-centered approach to focusing on the learner-centered one, the present paper tries to explore the importance of anxiety and self-esteem on language acquisition.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

In the field of psychology and foreign language learning, there are many efforts to review and investigate the role of affective factors on a foreign language acquisition, like attitudes, intelligence, personality, pressure, ego, anxiety and so on and their effect on learner's practices and performance within the classroom. It is important to recognize the fact that investigating the learners' self-esteem and foreign language anxiety are crucial to understanding learners' practices and performance in their classroom in order to improve the teaching and learning process.

Many studies revealed that learner who have a high level of anxiety, have a negative impact on their foreign language performance (Gregersen, T., 2003; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; Price, 1991). It could also be the one amongst the most factors behind this low performance. They also argue that learners' self-esteem and competitiveness may be two main factors affect language acquisition. On the contrary, learners with low self-esteem cannot perform better than those with high self-esteem.

## **3. Purpose and Significance of the Study**

In the field of a foreign language acquisition, there are many affective factors that play crucial roles in language learning and teaching processes. Foreign language anxiety and learners' self-esteem reflect their responses to language learning contexts. So exploring those factors and variables are crucial in learning context. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent of Jordanian university students' anxiety in the English language class. Moreover, it tries to measure the level of their self-esteem and whether there is a correlation between language learning anxiety and self-esteem among these Jordanian EFL college students.

Thus, exploring the relationship between foreign language anxiety and self-esteem may have a significant benefit for those in charge of the foreign languages teaching process and to understand the factors affecting the turnout of students towards learning foreign languages this can help to find different methods guidance to deal with these factors in order to improve the level of students' appreciation self-leading to effective acquisition of other languages. The researcher hoped that the results of this study will give the educational systems with sight to make a greater effort improving teaching and learning process. Moreover, teachers have to take into account that providing EFL students with low-anxiety learning courses and subjects can create more suitable atmosphere to reduce EFL anxiety and increase their self-esteem.

## **4. Questions of the Study**

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- To what extent are the Jordanian university students anxious in the English language class?
- 2- What is the level of the EFL learners' self-esteem?

3- Is there any statistically significant correlation at  $\alpha = 0.05$  between the students' foreign language anxiety, and their self-esteem?

## 5. Literature Review

### 5.1 Previous Research on Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

a number of studies have been conducted to observe the relationship between students anxiety and language learning. Sellers (2000) investigated the correlation between learners' anxiety and reading comprehension in Spanish. The findings revealed that students with a high level of anxiety recall less text content than those with lower anxiety.

Liu and Zhang (2008) explored the EFL students' anxiety in China with respect to self-esteem and its impact on learners. The results of a survey involving 934 first-years under graduate revealed that the majority of the EFL students felt anxious in their language classroom. Winasari (2010) also found that there were significant contributions of language learning anxiety and language learning strategies to students' English proficiency of Senior High School in Mengwi.

Wu (2010) explored the relationship between Taiwanese students' anxiety in the foreign language classroom and their language learning strategy. In order to examine the learners' perspectives towards learning English, the researcher utilized (FLCAS), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, and (COLTAS), Communicative Language Teaching Attitude Scale. The study revealed that the participants' attitudes toward the CLT approach and their level of anxiety were high.

Lee (2011) investigated the three categories of anxieties towards learning English. The participants consisted of 254 (109 females and 145 male). In order to understand participants' level of anxiety toward learning English language, the researcher used English learning anxiety survey. The results revealed that there were significant differences in the three categories of EFL anxieties where the highest mean was test anxiety.

Liu and Chen (2013) investigated the relationship between language anxiety and the learning strategies and multiple intelligences used by fifth and sixth-graders EFL learners in Taiwan. The results revealed that most of the participants experienced a mild level of anxiety in the EFL classroom. The results also indicated that there is a negative correlation between language anxiety and strategy.

Gopang, Bughio, and Pathan (2015) investigated EFL anxiety among 240 learners studying at Lasbela University in Pakistan using a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. This scale was developed by Horwitz, & Cope, (1986). The results revealed that there weren't any significant differences in learners' level of anxiety.

Al-Shboul, Sheikh Ahmad, Nordin and Abdul Rahman (2013) utilized the main challenges behind EFL students' reading anxiety. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to answer the questions of the study. The findings revealed that there were personal

and text factors towards foreign language reading anxiety

Al-Khasawneha (2016) studied the level and main sources of learners' anxiety toward English learning as a foreign language at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia. In order to obtain the main data, 97 English majored students participated in this study. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986) was used in this study. The findings revealed that the level of anxiety as reported by the students was moderate.

### *5.2 Previous Research on Self-esteem*

Naderi et al. (2009) investigated undergraduate students' self-esteem, gender and their academic achievement. The results showed that there was not any relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, but it was also observed that there was a significant difference between gender and self-esteem

Gusti, P (2012) examined the effect of students' self-esteem on developing their English proficiency in Negeri. Two types of questionnaires were used, Self-Esteem Questionnaire and Strategy Inventory of Language Learning, in addition to the TOEFL Test. The results showed that there was a significant positive effect of self-esteem on improving EFL proficiency.

Kalanzadeh, GH. A., Mahnegar, F., Hassannejad, E., & Bakhtiarvand, M (2013) investigated the relationship between EFL intermediate students' self – esteem and their speaking skills. The researcher chose two groups of students with high and low self – esteem according to their responses to a questionnaire developed by Lui et al. (2005) to measure their self – esteem. After analyzing the data, it was found that there was a correlation between the learners' self – esteem and their oral proficiency.

Similarly, Naouel (2015) examined the relationship between EFL students' self-esteem and their oral proficiency at the University of Constantine. He found that that there was a positive relationship between students' self-esteem and their oral proficiency and their level of academic achievement.

Nurdini (2017) also examined the main communication strategies used by EFL learners with low and high self-esteem in speaking skills. It was found that learners with high self-esteem employed more communication strategies compared to those with low self-esteem. Moreover, they used six kinds of strategies including code switching, message abandonment, literal translation, nonlinguistic means, appeal for help, and fillers or hesitation device.

Wang and Zhan (2020) examined the relationship between EFL Learner Characteristics and online self-regulation. In order to achieve the purpose of the study, a questionnaire was used as an instrument to measure learners' online beliefs, their anxiety and motivation toward English learning and online self-regulation. The findings revealed that learners' beliefs are positively predicted, while their learning anxiety is negatively predicted. It was also found that learners with high level of anxiety affects their motivations and their online self-regulated English learning and learners who have strong beliefs of self-efficacy affect their English learning effectively and efficiently.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1 Participants of the Study

The participants consisted of 50 students studying at ANU. They were chosen from two classes of English language skills Course, Level one with 25 students each. They were purposefully chosen from the Department of English language and literature for the academic year 2022.

### *Instruments*

For the purpose of obtaining information needed to achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher used these two instruments:

#### 1- The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale.

The researchers adapted the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) from Horwitz et al. (1986) and used in Liu and Jackson's (2008) research to measure the anxiety levels (see Appendix A, P.21).

#### 2- The Self-Esteem Scale.

The 10- items self-esteem scale developed by Rosenberg (1965) to measure learners' feelings of self-worth is used in this study. It includes two dimensions: positive and negative self-esteem with five items for each. Students have to answer these items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

### 6.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data was collected in January 2022. Before distributing the questionnaires, the researcher gave brief instructions on how to fill them and confirmed that their participations will be used for research purpose only. Then the students were asked to choose the items that describe them when learning different courses of the English language. During filling up the questionnaire, the researchers clarified some ambiguous items. The responses were analyzed descriptively using the SPSS program.

The analysis includes means and standard deviations to measure the level of anxiety towards EFL learning and learner's self-esteem. The researcher used Pearson Correlation to measure the correlation between the learners' foreign language anxiety, and self-esteem.

## 7. Results and Discussion

### 7.1 Level of Anxiety

Table 1. Means, Standard deviations and Rank of students' anxious in language class

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
la	50	1.67	3.94	2.6311	.63151
Valid N (listwise)	50				

Table 1 indicates that the overall degree for the learners' anxiety towards learning the English language is moderate as the mean is 2.63 with standard deviations 0.63. The table also indicates that the means of the students' responses to each item in the students' questionnaire range is between 1.67 and 3.94. Through the analysis of the data it is revealed that nearly 2.6% of the learners felt anxious in their foreign class, and feared that they will be evaluated negatively. This result highlights the importance of this factor towards learning English as a foreign language in enhancing their classroom practices and their self-esteem. Students' anxiety should be explored because it is a crucial factor in evaluating the learning efficiency of those EFL learners in their English classrooms.

As it is clear, learners feel somehow panic when they have to speak orally without preparation in their language class. They also feel uncomfortable when they talk loudly and worry about the consequences of failing their foreign language class. A lack of interests and motivations or lack of time might be the reasons behind feeling lost in the foreign class. However, the remarkable point is that learners say they wish they could have more confident of themselves. In general, the results of the of the anxiety Scale show that learners are more stressed and nervous while learning a foreign language.

### 7.2 Level of Self - esteem

When analyzing the students' self-esteem, the researcher computed the mean, standard deviation, of the self- esteem scale (SES) and its two dimensions: positive self-esteem (PSE) and negative self-esteem (NSE), developed by Rosenberg (1965). The results reported in Table 2

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of level of the EFL learners' self-esteem

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
<i>se</i>	50	2.00	3.60	2.9680	.38303
<i>Valid N (listwise)</i>	50				



Table 2 shows that EFL learners had a score range of 2.00 to 3.00 with a mean of 2.96 and standard deviation .38. This indicates that the learners had moderate self-esteem for themselves. They believed that they were satisfied with themselves and had a number of good abilities and qualities. In addition, they thought that they were able to do things as well as most other people and they had more respect for themselves. In general, they had a positive attitude toward themselves.

There were 3 items which focused on the communicative factors: be able to do things as well as most other people, feeling useless at times and feeling of worthiness, at least on an equal plane with others. These factors reflect how much one feels wanted and to be a part of the group, and how much one likes and accepts themselves as he /she is.

### 7.3 Correlation between the Learners' Foreign Language Anxiety, and their Self-esteem.

The third question asks if there is any significant correlation at  $\alpha = 0.05$  between the students' EFL anxiety, and their self-esteem.

To answer this question, the correlation coefficients between the items of the questionnaire that related to the learners' anxiety and their self - esteem in foreign classroom was calculated. Table 3 shows these results.

Table 3. Correlation between Anxiety and Self -esteem

	Correlations	la	se
la	Pearson Correlation	1	.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.585
	N	50	50
se	Pearson Correlation	.079	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.585	
	N	50	50

The results of this question revealed that the correlation between learners' EFL learning anxiety and their self-esteem is negative ( $r = -0.79$ ,  $P < .01$ ). This means that learners' self-esteem increases when their learning anxiety drops. You can say that the learners who have a high level of learning anxiety experience lower self-esteem and vice versa.

Such findings are supported by other studies that showed a negative correlation between EFL learning anxiety and learners' self-esteem. Patten, 1983; Peleg, 2009 indicated that when learners feel that they are capable of learning the foreign language successfully, they will experience less anxiety. They also show that those with a high degree of self-esteem, can overcome the difficulties and obstacles they faced while learning the language

## 8. Conclusion

Successful learning and acquisition of a foreign language is a complex process (Young, 1999). It is influenced by many cognitive and affective variables such as motivation, self-efficacy, attitudes, anxiety, and self-esteem which are considered as the vital sources of learners' differences in EFL learning (Tallon, 2009). In the context of EFL learning, there should be many efforts to reduce anxiety among learners. The study examined the correlation between self-esteem and language anxiety. The results revealed that there is a negative correlation ( $r = -0.79$ ,  $P < .01$ ) between learners' EFL learning anxiety and their self-esteem. The results also put much emphasis on the importance of promoting learners' self-esteem in order to improve their language performances.

## 9. Recommendations

In the light of the results of the present study, the following recommendations are provided:

- 1- Language teachers are recommended to put much emphasis on promoting their learners' self-esteem through creating a classroom atmosphere that encourages them to recognize their anxiety and help them learn to deal with them.
- 2- Language teachers should design interesting tasks and activities in order to create opportunities for meaningful learning and encourage a relaxed and supportive language classroom.
- 3- More comprehensive research must be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of other factors that relate significantly to the degree of self-esteem such as risk-taking, inhibition, anxiety, locus of control, and attribution style because these variables are also factors which determine students' success in oral production tasks.
- 4- Teachers should incorporate techniques to enhance students' self-esteem as a part of their pedagogical philosophy.

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### Appendix A

#### Questionnaires

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.				
2	At times I think I am no good at all				
3	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.				
4	I am able to do things as well as most other people.				

5	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.				
6	I certainly feel useless at times				
7	I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others				
8	I wish I could have more respect for myself.				
9	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure				
10	I take a positive attitude toward myself.				

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### Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

		Strongly agree	Agree	disagree	Strongly disagree
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class				

2	I don't worry about making mistakes in language class				
3	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class				
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language				
5	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes				
6	During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the				
7	keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.				
8	I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.				
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class				
10	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.				
11	I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.				
12	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.				

13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.				
14	I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers				
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.				
16	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.				
17	I often feel like not going to my language class.				
18	I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.				
19	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.				
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.				

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.



**Appendix B**
**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
La1	50	1.00	5.00	2.5600	1.29615
la2	50	1.00	5.00	2.4800	1.23288
la3	50	1.00	5.00	2.2400	1.28667
la4	50	1.00	5.00	2.5400	1.16426
la5	50	1.00	5.00	2.3600	1.30556
la6	50	1.00	5.00	2.3600	1.20814
la7	50	1.00	5.00	2.7800	1.32926
la8	50	1.00	5.00	2.7000	1.35902
la9	50	1.00	5.00	3.9200	1.15776
la10	50	1.00	5.00	2.5000	1.26572
la11	50	1.00	5.00	2.3200	1.15069
la12	50	1.00	5.00	2.1200	1.11831
la13	50	1.00	5.00	2.4000	1.37024
la14	50	1.00	5.00	3.8200	1.18992
la15	50	1.00	5.00	1.9400	1.07684
la16	50	1.00	5.00	2.1200	1.28793
la17	50	1.00	5.00	3.9400	1.18511
la18	50	1.00	5.00	2.2600	1.29063
Valid (listwise)	N 50				

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
se1	50	1.00	4.00	3.6600	.68839
se2	50	1.00	4.00	2.9800	.95810
se3	50	1.00	4.00	3.4200	.85928
se4	50	1.00	4.00	3.2400	1.11685
se5	50	1.00	4.00	2.3400	1.06157
se6	50	1.00	4.00	2.3600	1.10213
se7	50	1.00	4.00	2.8000	1.14286
se8	50	1.00	5.00	3.5000	.86307
se9	50	1.00	4.00	1.8400	1.09470
se10	50	1.00	4.00	3.5400	.93044

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