Students' Perceived Competence Affecting Level of Anxiety in Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Learners' experiences, instructors' observations, and review of western literature evidenced that students' perceived competency affects the experience of anxiety while learning foreign language. This study was also an extension of knowing the students' perceived competence level as an independent variable affecting their levels of anxiety in learning foreign language particularly in the Pakistani context. To explore the gender differences in the variables under study was another objective of the present study. A randomly selected sample of 157 students from eight English language learning classes in Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan was used. Two instruments were employed: The Perceived Competence Scale (Williams & Deci, 1996) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Data were analyzed by independent sample *t*-test, and Two-Way Analysis of Variance. Students with low perceived competence experienced more feelings of anxiety as compared to the students with high perceived competence. Analysis for gender showed that male students had higher competency, therefore, experienced low anxiety, communication apprehension, and negative feelings of evaluation than female students. The results also indicated that gender of students and their perceived competency interact leading to language learning anxiety.

Keywords: perceived competence, language learning anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension

Literature available on educational issues of students' competencies shows that perceptions and judgments of students about their own learning abilities, skills, or competencies, affect their academic roles, performances, and proficiencies particularly in

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learning foreign language in the classrooms. Among the factors influencing foreign language learning, the element of individual differences in perceived competence is paramount. Perceived competence is one's belief that he/she has the skills and qualifications to do things well or it refers to the requisite qualities in a specific situation to achieve specified tasks (Ormrod, 2006). For students, competency is a belief that they have the academic capabilities to reach the required levels in foreign language courses (Matsushima & Shiomi, 2003).

It has been consistently indicated that feelings of anxiety can be a hindrance to foreign language acquisition and proficiency (Aida, 1994; Crookall & Oxford, 1991; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Ganschow & Sparks, 1996; MacIntyre, 1995). Krashen (1985a, 1985b) also supported the view that anxiety impedes the path of student's ability to operate in target language. A connection may be observed among anxiety, capability to learn, difficulty level of goals, perceived competence, and outcomes of learning that can act as obstacles to input, processing, cognitive operation of accessing information in memory, and at the output level. Thus, one may face even more failure that increases anxiety. Increased language anxiety then may become a serious factor for the other associated problems with self-confidence, self-esteem, and challenging task ability, and ultimately restraint that restricts proficiency in the second language. The issue of foreign language anxiety is not simple to define because it is complicated in structure. Furthermore, interconnected variables like individual characteristics of learners especially perceived competence may intervene in the level of language learning anxiety (Crookall & Oxford, 1991).

Perceived competence of the students of foreign language classes can be defined as generally the indication of students' belief about complete concept of capability to learn foreign language. In contrast to efficacy, the central meaning of competence is the belief of having the strength to produce an influence in terms of achieving a given target related to that competency. For instance, one who has high competency may involve in more beneficial and healthy tasks. While, one who has low competency may hold back a thought or feelings of anxiety and disappointment (Horwitz & Young, 1991). Confidence is another term that clarifies the concept of perceived competence more precisely. As an example, person's confidence refers to the extent to which he is good at math; but the same person's perceived competence refers to the extent that he could also be good at upcoming algebra or statistics courses (Jimenez, 2006).

Student's judgment of perceived competence contributes a major part in determining his/her level of taking challenges or risks, and level of anxiety experienced during learning the foreign language. According to Bandura's theory (1997), when individuals have high competency, they may perceive tasks easier to handle even they are difficult to process in actual. On the other hand, low competency always comes out as low proficiency and increased anxiety and academic stress.

Studies conducted on second language learning have demonstrated that students' low perceived competency for a course to be learned in certain situations, escalate anxiety. Bong (1997) explored what motivated students to learn second language in the foreign languages classroom, and how students perceived their goal attainments and their capability to learn language. Learners' attribute their success and failure to their competencies for certain courses of foreign language learning. Competencies contribute a role in the connection between task achievement and open choice to learn courses of foreign language learning. Students' negative thinking that they are "poor at languages", create anxiety among them to learn foreign language.

Mary Siew-Lian and Wong (2005) also provided the support for the claim that a significant positive association existed between students' perception about competence and language learning strategies. Interview findings also revealed that using a number of language learning strategies are often influenced by high self-efficacy and perceived competence that may impede their level of anxiety when learning foreign language.

The empirical work into examining the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning lacks clarity of conclusion due to the presence of several factors that may influence learning. Of these factors, one is trait anxiety which refers to general state of person in which he/she becomes anxious and other is state anxiety which refers to fearful anticipation reported at a specific time moment. For instance, some of the students experience the general anxiety in all situations and some may experience in specific situations like when to speak in a foreign language in the presence of class fellows (Spielberger, 1983). Students' perception of their own communicative competence for both indigenous and foreign language is another factor influencing languages proficiency. These students in fact assign too low a value to their competence, and become anxious performers (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997). Students' fear of being negatively evaluated by the course instructor in front of other students itself is a major factor behind being

anxious towards foreign language learning (Nicole, Pajares, & Herron, 2006).

Gender based differences in learning language anxiety fostered more insight into understanding about language anxiety. Many studies examining language anxiety and gender differences render further information regarding students' performance in class setting. Kitano (2001) examined learners from two U.S. universities who were enrolled in Japanese courses. The findings postulated that level of anxiety in female students was high and was negatively correlated with their self-perceived ability to execute many goals in learning Japanese, whereas, male students did not demonstrate this propensity. However, in contrast to the findings of Kitano, another study conducted by Campbell and Shaw (1994) depicted a significant interaction between gender and foreign language anxiety. Male students experienced more anxiety when learn a foreign language in the classroom as compared to their female counterparts.

Based on the literature review, the purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the perceived levels of competence reported by a randomly selected sample of foreign language (English) students in a regular university setting. To determine gender differences among the students perceiving themselves as competent and not competent in relation to anxiety was another objective of the present study. The hypothesis was postulated that the differences between the two groups' perceptions about their competency they held towards foreign language learning would affect their level of anxiety for foreign language learning. It was also hypothesized that male students will have higher level of perceived competence and lower level of foreign language learning anxiety than female students.

Method

Participants

A sample consisted of 157 students; 88 males (M_{age} = 25.3, SD = 4.36) and 69 females (M_{age} = 24.9, SD = 5.16) of introductory English classes taken from eight English language learning classes in Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan. In spite of being drawn from different departments of the University, the participants were homogeneous in respect of mother language with Urdu 130(83%), Punjabi 17(11%), and other 10(6%); of educational level 121(77%) in BS-Semester 1 and 36(23%) in BS-Semester 3; and

cultural background 135(86%) urban and 22(14%) rural. To select the sample, a simple random sampling technique (probability approach) was used. The students of English language classes from eight departments were randomly selected utilizing every nth number (here every 2nd roll no.) from the complete list of students enrolled in each department. Detail of sampling is given below.

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

Departments	Total Enrolled Students	Selected Students	Male	Female
Psychology	48	24	11	13
Sociology	38	19	13	06
Philosophy	22	11	06	05
Statistics	40	20	05	15
Education	33	16	04	12
Islamiat	33	16	05	11
Commerce	65	34	30	04
Mass Communication	34	17	14	03
Total	313	157	88	69

Instruments

To collect the information for the present study, the following scales were firstly adapted and translated into native language using a Back Translation Method.

Perceived Competence Scale (PCS).   This scale is developed by Williams and Deci (1996). It is a short 4-item questionnaire with 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 indicating *not at all true* to 7 indicating *very true* designed to assess constructs from self-determination theory. The PCS assesses participants' feelings of competence about, for instance, taking a particular college course, engaging in a healthier behavior, participating in a physical activity regularly, or following through on some commitment. A person's score on the PCS is calculated simply by averaging his or her responses on the four items. Cutoff score is 13 and a score higher than 13 is considered as high competency level. The original version

of PCS has the split-half reliability of .83 and the translated version has the reliability coefficient of .77 ($N = 50$).

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). It is a self-reported questionnaire developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) having 33-items. The FLCAS is based on an analysis of potential sources of anxiety in a language classroom, integrating three related anxieties: Communication Apprehension (9, 27, 18, 4, 29, 1, 13, 14, 20, 24, 33), Fear of Negative Evaluation (7, 23, 31, 15, 19, 2, 8, 21), and Feeling of General Anxiety (5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 16). It is a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* (scale point 1) to *strongly disagree* (scale point 5) the middle point being *neutral* (scale point 3). Anxiety scores lower than 3.0 would indicate some level of anxiety for questions 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 33. Anxiety scores higher than 3.0 would indicate some level of anxiety for questions 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, 32. To obtain a total score for level of anxiety on the whole scale, items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32 are reverse scored. Higher scores show the higher level of anxiety. The original version of FLCAS has the split-half reliability of .88 and the translated version has the reliability coefficient of .81($p < .05$) for the sample ($N = 50$) involved in translation process.

Procedure

The study was consisted of two parts.

Part 1. The purpose of Part I of the study was to adapt and validate the instruments to be used in main study. The relevance of all the instruments was firstly checked by a sample of 20 educationists. They were asked to examine all the statements carefully and rate which items were relevant to our culture. Analysis of responses revealed that all the statements were fairly relevant to our culture. To translate the original scales, Back Translation Method was adopted. This process of translation was completed in following three steps.

Step 1 (English to Urdu translation). Ten bilingual educationists were asked to translate the statements in such a way that Urdu translation of each statement could convey the same meanings as the statements in English do. On the basis of responses, the translated items were carefully scrutinized and only one closest translation was selected for each statement considering its suitability and having same sense of meanings. These translated scales were

then further rechecked by three judges, who were Psychologists (one Ph.D., one M.Phil. degree holder, and one Master's degree holder) for the clarity of content, grammar, and sense of meanings of items. For this purpose, Urdu and English items were written parallel to each other against a 4-point rating scale indicating relevance of Urdu items with English items. The response categories were Completely Dissimilar, Less Similar, Highly Similar, and Completely Similar. The judges were asked to evaluate whether the each item from Urdu version was capable to convey the same meanings as in the English version. On the basis of their evaluation the best possible translation conveying the meanings closest to the original was retained.

Step 2 (Back translation from Urdu to English). Back translation technique was used as a method of reducing errors and biases in translation. The scales translated into Urdu were given to another 10 bilingual experts. They were unfamiliar with the original versions of the scales and were requested to translate Urdu version of scales into English as much as accurate translation as possible conveying the maximum similar meanings.

Step 3 (Reliability and validity). The reliability and validity of all scales were determined in this step. Both Urdu translated scales were administered to a sample ($N = 50$); 30 males ($M_{age} = 24.7$, $SD = 4.01$) and 20 females ($M_{age} = 25.5$, $SD = 4.33$) of introductory English classes taken from eight English language learning classes in Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. For the determination of reliability and validity, split-half reliability coefficients were computed. For translated PCS and FLCAS, reliability coefficients were found .77 and .81, respectively.

Part II. All the participants were approached at their departments. Scales along with a demographic variable sheet were administered to them. The participants were firstly informed about the purpose of the study and then were given the instructions about how to fill the questionnaires. The confidentiality of their responses was ensured to them. They were told that their identity would not be disclosed to any one and their responses will be used only for research purpose.

Results

On the basis of the responses on Perceived Competence Scale, the participants were divided into two groups: Group 1 ($n = 64$) having higher perceived competency and Group 2 ($n = 93$) having

low perceived competency for the course of English language. Participants who scored above 13 were categorized as with high competence and who scored below than 13 were categorized as with low competence. Confidentiality was assured to them for their given information. The data was processed using the SPSS 17 Statistical Package.

Independent sample t-test was performed to compare the two groups of students with perception of low and high competency in relation to the scale of FLCAS and its subscales (Table 2), and to study the significance of gender differences in perceiving the competency and experiencing the feelings of anxiety while learning foreign language (Table 3). Two-way ANOVA was also employed to see the interaction effect of gender and perceived competency on feeling of anxiety (Table 4).

Table 2

Mean Differences in Two Groups of Students Perceiving High and Low Competency on FLCAS and Subscales (N =157)

Scales	Perceiving high competency (n = 64)	Perceiving low competency (n = 93)	t(155)	p	Cohen's d
	M(SD)	M(SD)			
FLCAS	107.08(23.17)	122.19(26.12)	1.99	.02	0.31
CA	56.75(14.23)	61.08(13.12)	1.97	.02	0.31
FNE	53.14(17.54)	66.11(15.23)	2.01	.02	0.32
GFA	59.35(18.21)	64.15(14.27)	2.31	.01	0.37

Note. FLCAS = Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale; CA = Communication Apprehension; FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; GFA = General Feelings of Anxiety.

Table 2 reveals the significant differences between the two groups of students who perceive themselves as high and low competent in relation to their anxiety for learning foreign language and its subscales. The results show that the students who perceive themselves highly competent experience lower anxiety, ccommunication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and general feeling of anxiety than those who perceive themselves low competent.

The results depicted in Table 3 shows significant difference between male and female students. Male students are found higher in perceived competency than female students. The higher mean score of male students also shows the greater perception about competency in learning foreign language than female students do (see Table 3).

Table 3

Gender Differences on PC and FLCA along Subscales (N =157)

Scales	Male Students (n = 88) M(SD)	Female Students (n = 69) M(SD)	t(155)	p	Cohen's d
PC	22.18(9.97)	16.15(8.12)	1.96	.025	0.31
FLCAS	117.18(13.97)	131.01(11.25)	2.74	.001	0.44
CA	61.42(11.31)	66.32(12.93)	1.98	.025	0.31
FNE	57.17(13.21)	71.21(14.76)	2.31	.010	0.37
GFA	54.72(13.57)	67.18(15.03)	1.99	.025	0.31

Note. PC = Perceived Competence; FLCAS = Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale; CA = Communication Apprehension; FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; GFA = General Feelings of Anxiety.

Table 3 also shows the significant differences in the level of anxiety for foreign language learning. The results imply that female students become more anxious when learn foreign language than male students in the same class. The results show that female students experience more anxiety, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and general feeling of anxiety than male students.

Table 4

Two Way ANOVA for 2(Gender) × 2(Perceived Competence) for the Scores on Foreign Language Learning Anxiety Scale

Source Main Effect	SS	MS	df	F	p
Gender	4.855484e-4	4.8555e-2	1	3.43	.021
PC	0.682064082	0.6820641	1	1.48	.041
Gender X PC	0.984826071	0.8148261	1	2.64	.035
Error	432.915193	1.145299<-	153		
Total	443.5614235		156		

Table 4 indicates the results of Two Way Analysis of Variance for 2 (gender of participants) × 2 (levels of perceived competence). Results indicate the significant main effects of interaction between gender of students and high/low levels of perceived competency on foreign language learning anxiety. This result implies that gender of students and perceived competency both have interactive effects on language learning anxiety. Means and standard deviations of respective groups along gender and perceived competence is given in Table 5 and plotted in Figure 1.

Table 5

Mean and Standard Deviations of Groups along Gender and Perceived Competence

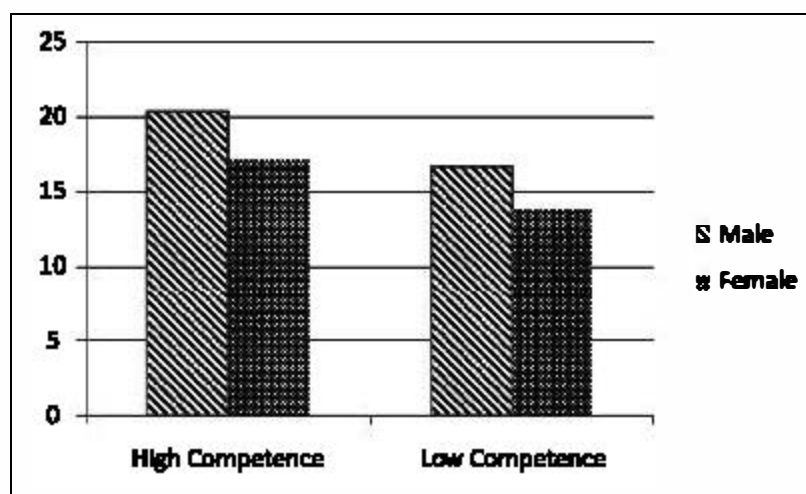|	Perceived Competence	
	High Competence	Low Competence
Gender	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*
Male	20.31(9.33)	16.68(10.02)
Female	17.13(10.43)	13.84(11.31)

Figure 1. Comparison between male and female students with high and low competence

Discussion

The findings of the present study are helpful in understanding the level of anxiety when students learn foreign language in the classroom. The literature review revealed that the investigations into the connection of anxiety to foreign language learning has presented fluxed and blurring findings due to the effects of several other variables that may influence learning. Students' perception about their abilities and competencies is one of these variables that can affect their learning (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997).

It was hypothesized that those students who perceive themselves as more competent, experience less anxiety for foreign language learning. Findings supported the assumption and suggested that anxiety can be affected by students' perceptions about their competencies (Table 2). It was found that students who perceive themselves as competent report less anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation in foreign language learning class. These findings are also consistent with the work of MacIntyre (1995) who reported that perception of respondents and learners is associated with their performance of learning in foreign language class. MacIntyre (1995) stated that when students find himself with high self-efficacy and high competencies in a particular course, they always report low levels of anxiety in that course.

It was also assumed that male and female students differ in experiencing anxiety associated with foreign language learning. As assumed, male students perceived more competency, therefore, experienced low anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation than female students (Table 3). The findings from the study of Matsushima and Shiomi (2003) provided the support for the present results. They asserted that gender difference is a key contribution in determining the foreign language learning anxiety and performance of students. They pointed out that as compared to female, male students experience high competence and autonomy in the classroom which result into their low level of anxiety when they learn foreign language.

Anxiety seems to be an obstacle to the cognitive processing of English language and may affect ultimately several interrelated aspects of performance in learning foreign language. In light of the findings of the research, it is recommended that in order to alleviate feeling of anxiety, learning settings and environment should be made comfortable and less stressful. Effective communication is another way to cope with language anxiety. Students must be provided with positive reinforcement for their completed task.

In addition to these affective suggestions, universities should follow innovative dimensions to reduce fearful anticipation and to increase students attainments. To alleviate anxiety, universities require to design curricula for foreign language. From this fact, the content of foreign language programs should be accurate, and must be according to the students' needs and interests. In short, for the purpose of lowering anxiety for learning foreign language in university, students should develop confidence, and a teacher must generate a sense of competence in their students. A teacher should provide opportunities of developing a sense of autonomy and competency. Because it is important to increase motivation in any specific domain that how student perceives his/her competency. If a student perceives him/herself with high competency, it will definitely work in decreasing anxiety during foreign language learning class.

Conclusions

It can be deduced from this study that foreign language anxiety is experienced by students with low perceived competency than those with high perceived competency. The study further suggests that anxiety experienced in foreign language learning (English in this case) differs among male and female students. These findings revealed males do not underestimate their competencies and capabilities for language learning, and therefore remain less anxious during the second language class. Female students often report communication apprehension when share their experiences of foreign language learning. The empirical data from this study suggested that students are fearful to speak English in the presence of classmates even if they have made rich practice in speaking English with fluency. In Pakistan, female students also have complaints about the fear of negative evaluation. They usually have general perception and strong belief that they would be negatively evaluated by their teachers if they will commit mistakes in writing and particularly in speaking. Finally, it can be concluded that communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation may lead to general feelings of anxiety among female students.

Limitations and Suggestions

The present study bore some deficiencies, therefore, it is important to consider them when finally evaluate the research

findings. The sample size was not large enough to represent the whole population due to the limited time and resources. The study also lacks external validity because the sample was specifically taken from eight departments of Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, so it can't be generalized to the whole population of other departments. Therefore, the present study invites the other researchers to conduct further studies with a representative larger sample from all departments. This study may well be replicated with some other demographic variables that could be more associated with the phenomenon of foreign language learning anxiety. To summarize, further researches are needed to provide the appropriate ways for minimizing the language anxiety. Even if foreign language learning anxiety is successfully controlled, many predicaments faced by the students can be reduced. Lastly, but more importantly, psychologists better know that computer anxiety is a risk factor for the success of organizations, so it must be controlled for the progress of organizations.

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