



## L2 ANXIETY INFLUENCING SELF-REPORTED LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY ON PAKISTANI ESL ARTS STUDENTS

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### Abstract:

This paper is part of a large study that examines L2 anxiety, L2 learning beliefs and achievement of Pakistani tertiary level ESL students. Drawing on the data obtained from 183 ESL university students of arts and humanities subjects through Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), this study finds that Pakistani ESL students exhibited fairly high level of L2 anxiety. It also finds Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) to be the most dominant source of the students' L2 anxiety, followed by Communication Apprehension (CA) and Test Anxiety (TA) as the second and third sources respectively. The study further finds that female students displayed higher level of L2 anxiety than did male students. No significant differences were found in the anxiety level of students based on study levels. An important finding of the study includes a moderate, negative association between students' L2 anxiety and their rating of English language proficiency. Based upon the findings, the study offers certain pedagogical implications for the improvement of English language teaching and learning in Pakistan and worldwide.

**Keywords:** L2 anxiety; self-reported language proficiency; gender; study level; Pakistani ESL arts students

### 1. Introduction

The shift in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in foreign language teaching and research from teacher-centered approach to learner-oriented approach prompted a large number of language researchers to pay more attention to the individual differences of L2 learners. Such individual differences include L2 aptitude, L2 learning styles, L2 learning

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strategies, motivation, attitude, beliefs and anxiety (Wang, 2014). Ellis (1997) argues that learner internal variables and affective states are highly significant in explaining for individual differences in learning achievement. One such affective factor is anxiety, which strongly affects the L2 learning process (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Liu & Huang, 2011). Its pervasive nature is shown by Horwitz's (2000) claim that around one-third of all L2 learners experience L2 anxiety in certain degrees. Studies have shown that L2 anxiety is negatively associated with students' final grades, their oral performance, and other linguistic skill such as listening, reading and writing (Elkhafaifi, 2005; In'nami, 2006; Philips, 1992). Overall, research shows a negative and moderate relationship between foreign language anxiety and language achievement (Horwitz, 2001).

A few studies have reported the existence of foreign language anxiety in Pakistani ESL learners, but there is inconsistency in the results (Awan et al, 2010; Gopang, Bhugio and Pathan, 2015; Gopang et al., 2015). This paper attempts to examine the L2 anxiety, its sources and association with students' self-reported English language proficiency.

## 2. Literature Review

Anxiety is defined by Spielberger (1983) as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system. According to Horwitz et al. (1986) Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.

There are three approaches to the study of anxiety; namely, trait, state and situation anxieties (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b). Trait anxiety is a permanent disposition of an individual experiencing worry without a time limitation (Levitt, 1980), while state anxiety is a temporary condition of an individual feeling nervousness that varies in intensity and fluctuates over time; for instance, the apprehension felt by a student before taking an exam (Spielberger, 1983). The third approach to the study of anxiety is situation-specific anxiety, which is the likelihood of becoming worried in a specific situation such as during speaking a foreign language (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). Language anxiety is considered by researchers as anxiety experienced in a well-defined situation of learning or using a foreign/second language, hence situation specific anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b).

Researchers like Scovel (1978) and Bailey (1983) have highlighted the facilitating aspect of anxiety. They say that it is the type of anxiety that motivates an L2 learner to face the challenges in L2 learning process. But majority of the researchers on anxiety argue that language anxiety is debilitating in effect and hinders the process of language learning (Aida, 1994; Elaldi, 2016; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a; Philips, 1992). Anxiety can result in L2 learners losing faith in their abilities, avoiding participation in classroom activities, and even quitting their efforts to learn an L2 (Na,

2007). L2 learners with high anxiety level often perform at lower levels than those with lower anxiety (Cui, 2011).

Researchers working on language anxiety have developed instruments for measuring L2 anxiety construct. The most successful and widely used among these instruments is Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which is a self-report questionnaire having 33 items answered on 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The anxiety score on FLCAS ranges from 33 (minimum) to 165 (maximum), with high score showing high level of anxiety. Horwitz et al. mentioned three components of L2 anxiety; namely, communication apprehension (CA), fear of negative evaluation (FNE) and test anxiety (TA). CA is the worry that an individual experiences when communicating in L2, while FNE is the fear of being judged negatively and avoidance of evaluative situations. The third component, TA, according to Horwitz et al. (1986) emanates from the fear of failure.

Many researchers have used FLCAS to examine the levels of anxiety of L2 learners in different contexts. Studies have reported various levels of anxiety such as American students of Spanish showing anxiety level 94.5 (Horwitz, 1986), Korean students of English showing 101.2 (Truitt, 1995), Chinese students of English yielding 101 score (Wang, 2005) and Turkish students of English scoring 103.6 (Elaldi, 2016). These levels of anxiety have been reported to have negative associations with students' performance in L2 learning (Aida, 1994; Awan et al. 2010; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al. 1986; Kim, 1998; Liu & Huang, 2011; Rodriguez, 1995; Tuncer & Dogan, 2015). The meta-analyses findings consistently reveal significant, negative association ranging from -.20 to -.25 between anxiety and achievement (Goetz and Hall, 2013).

Variations in L2 anxiety based on gender, level of study and field of study have also been reported; for example, Awan et al. (2010) and Elaldi (2016) have found men showing higher levels of L2 anxiety compared to women. On other hand, studies have also reported female students showing higher levels of anxiety as compared to men (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Ezzi, 2012; Park and French, 2013). Anxiety has also been reported to increase with increase in study level, which appears strange as increase in study level is expected to boost confidence in L2 learners. Saito and Samimy (1996) studied L2 anxiety of beginning, intermediate and advanced level students of Japanese and found that advanced level students showed the highest level of anxiety. They ascribed their findings to the nature of course material as students' course had changed from reading and writing skills to listening and speaking wherein students are usually more vulnerable to anxiety. Yet in another study conducted on 98 Turkish university students, Elaldi (2016) studied English language anxiety in both preparatory class and grade four. He found that there was a significant increase in the anxiety level of fourth grade students as they continued their education from preparatory class.

Inquiry has also been made into the sources of L2 anxiety. Young (1991) mentioned six sources of L2 anxiety, which include: students' beliefs about L2 learning; teachers' beliefs regarding L2 teaching; personal and interpersonal issues such as low

self-esteem, competitiveness, shyness and speech anxiety; classroom procedures; student-teacher interactions; and language testing. Communication Apprehension is often reported as the most dominant source of learners' L2 anxiety (Javed, 2014; Rajanathan, Prakash, & Husin, 2013). Some researchers have also reported FNE & TA as the main sources of L2 anxiety in their studies (Cheng, 2005). Proper identification of learners' sources of anxiety and the subsequent treatment can alleviate L2 anxiety experienced by the learners.

The present study seeks to examine the level of anxiety among Pakistani university undergraduate of arts and humanities subjects. It also enquires into the sources of students' anxiety and variations in anxiety based on gender and study level. This study is different from previous studies in that it correlates students' anxiety with their self-reported L2 proficiency, while most of the previous studies examined the effects of anxiety on students' grades or their linguistic skills. The study is guided by the following research questions.

1. What is the level of L2 anxiety of Pakistani ESL arts and humanities students?
2. What are the sources of their L2 anxiety?
3. How does their L2 anxiety vary according to gender and study level?
4. How does students' L2 anxiety relate to their self-reported English language proficiency?

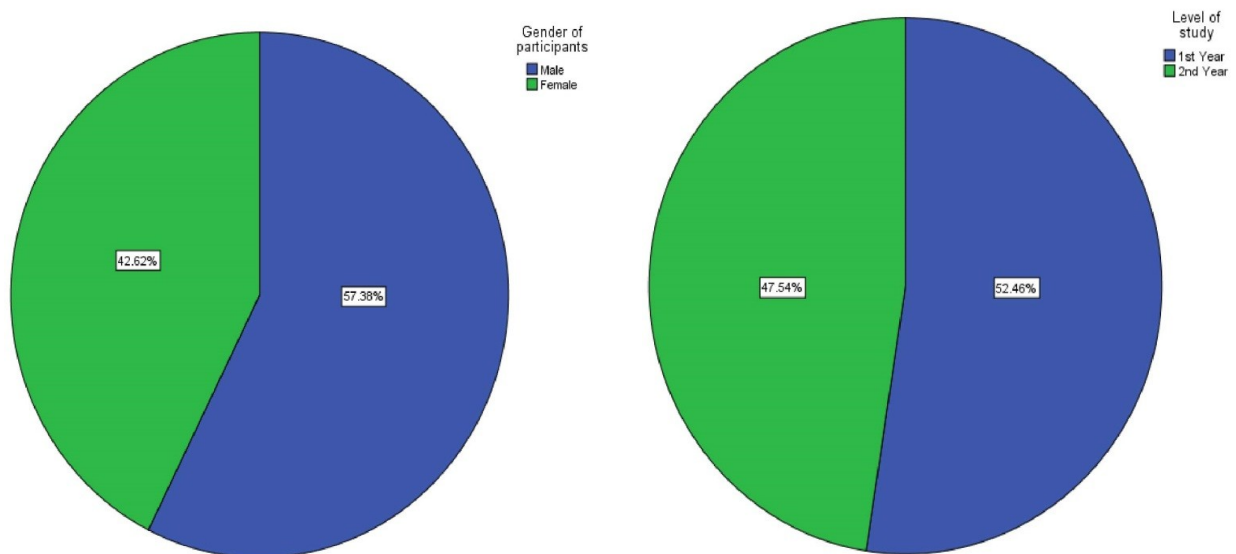
### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The current study is quantitative in nature. It is conducted in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS framework. The composite score of FLCAS is used to measure the overall anxiety level of the students. The three components of the FLCAS serve as the subscales and their scores give us the sources of students' L2 anxiety.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants of the study include 183 undergraduate students of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> years of a university of Pakistan situated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. The students were selected on the basis of convenient sampling method, which is a very common method in second language acquisition research (Dornyei, 2007). The distribution of students according to gender and study level is displayed in figures 1 and 2.



**Figures 1:** Gender Distribution of Students

**Figure 2:** Study Level Distribution of Students

### 3.3 Instrument

A questionnaire based on Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS was used to collect data from the sample. The questionnaire included 33 items answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Twenty-four of the items were high anxiety items, while 9 items showed lack of anxiety. The items showing lack of anxiety were reversed coded so that high score on the scale meant high level of anxiety and vice versa. The questionnaire also included a portion for demographic information giving us information like gender, level of study and self-reported language proficiency etc.

### 3.4 Data Collection

One of the researchers himself visited the classes in 2017, and with the prior permission of the university administration and teachers, and willingness of the subjects, circulated the questionnaires among the students in their class time. The students filled in the questionnaire in less than an hour and returned it to the researcher. The students were assured of the confidentiality of their identity.

### 3.5 Data Analytical Tools

The quantitative data were entered into SPSS Version 22, and analyzed for seeking answers to the four research questions. The analyses included descriptive statistics for determining the students' levels of anxiety and their sources of L2 anxiety. Independent samples t tests were carried out for examining group variations based on gender and study levels. For association between L2 anxiety and self-reported English language proficiency, Pearson product moment correlation test was employed.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

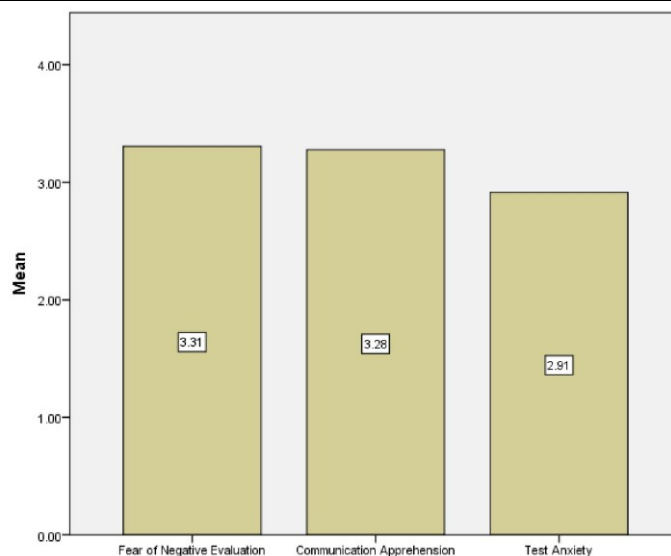
The descriptive statistics reveal that students' level of anxiety was fairly high, with mean value of 102.92 and standard deviation of 18.46 (See table 1). The level of anxiety was found higher than many of the previous studies such as Truitt's (1995) 101.2 and Wang's (2005) 101; nevertheless, it was slightly lower than 103.6 reported in Elaldi's (2016) study on Turkish students of English. Such a high level of anxiety is often reported to adversely affect students' performance in L2 learning. Table 1 also shows students rating of their English language proficiency on a rating scale of five points. The mean value was 3.31 with standard deviation of 0.90. The mean value of their rating does not reveal a high opinion about their English language proficiency, which is quite understandable considering their high level of anxiety.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of L2 Anxiety Level and Self-reported L2 Proficiency (N = 183)

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
FLCAS Score	48	145	102.92	18.46
SRLP	1	5	3.31	.90

**Note:** FLCAS = Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Score; SRLP = Self-reported Language Proficiency; SD = Standard Deviation

In response to research question 2, figure 3 displays a bar graph of the sources of the students' L2 anxiety. FNE is the most dominant source of students' anxiety, with a mean value of 3.31; followed by CA (M = 3.28) and TA (M = 2.91). This result is in line with Cheng's (2005) findings, who also reported FNE as the main cause of students' language anxiety, followed by CA and TA. Pakistani arts students appear to be threatened most by their teachers' and classmates' negative judgments and remarks. In circumstances as these students tend to avoid evaluative situations for fear of being laughed at. The language teachers should take concrete measures to enable such students to cope with nervousness aroused in evaluative situations. Creating small groups during classroom activities to minimize the exposure of an individual student suffering from FNE to entire class, and engaging students in role-plays with assumed identity behind which they can protect their true identity, can alleviate the anxiety of students.



**Figure 3:** Sources of Students' L2 Anxiety (N = 183)

To answer the third research question about group difference in students' L2 anxiety, two independent samples t tests were carried out. The test for gender differences showed that female students tend to be more anxious than the male students. The difference was significant at  $p < 0.05$  (see table 2). This finding was also supported by Elkhafaifi (2005), Ezzi (2012), Gursory and Arman (2016), Park and French (2013) and Tien (2018), who reported higher level of language anxiety in female students compared to males. The reason for females' higher level of anxiety may be ascribed to the nature of Pakistani society in particular the Pashtun culture in which this study was conducted. The females get fewer opportunities of higher education and jobs compared to males; they study in schools and colleges which are meant for women only; hence they feel anxious when they attend classes together with male students at university level.

**Table 2:** Independent Samples t-test for Gender

	Male (N=105)		Female (N=78)		Levene's Test		t-test		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F Value	p	t Value	df	p (2-tailed)
L2 Anxiety	100.27	18.96	106.49	17.23	.27	.61	2.28	181	.02

**Note:** SD = Standard Deviation

The t test for differences in L2 anxiety based on study level did not render significant results (see table 3), which means that there were no differences in the anxiety levels of 1<sup>st</sup> year and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students. This result is in contradiction with the findings of Elaldi (2016) and Saito and Samimy (1996), who reported increase in L2 anxiety as students advanced in their studies. The reason for this result may lie in the fact that in the current study, there was only one year gap between the two levels of study and it could be assumed that students' anxiety does not change over such a short period of time; whereas in those studies that reported increase or change in anxiety with increase in

study level, there were longer gaps between the various levels of study that the researchers examined.

**Table 3:** Independent Samples t-test for Study Levels

	1 <sup>st</sup> Year (N=96)		2 <sup>nd</sup> Year (N=87)		Levene's Test			t-test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F Value	<i>p</i>	t Value	df	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
L2 Anxiety	103.02	17.57	102.80	19.48	.56	.45	0.08	181	0.94

**Note:** SD = Standard Deviation

The fourth and last research questions concerned the relationship between students L2 anxiety and their self-reported language proficiency. Pearson product-moment correlation test was employed to determine the association between the two variables. Negative association ( $r = -0.44, p < 0.01$ ) was found between L2 anxiety and SRLP, which means that increase in students' L2 anxiety resulted in their low opinion about their proficiency in English language. The correlation was moderate but significant. It also corresponds to the previously reported negative, moderate associations between anxiety and achievement (Horwitz, 2001).

**Table 4:** Pearson Correlation Between SRLP and L2 Anxiety (N = 183)

	L2 Anxiety
SRLP	-0.44**

**Note:** SRLP = Self-reported Language Proficiency

\*\* =  $p < .01$

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that Pakistani students of Arts exhibit high level of English language anxiety, and that their L2 anxiety mainly stems from fear of being judged negatively and fear of communication in English language. It was also found out that female students displayed higher level of L2 anxiety than did males. There were no differences in the L2 anxiety between students of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> years. The L2 anxiety experienced by the university undergraduates also had an effect on their rating of their English language proficiency. There was a negative, moderate association between their language anxiety and their rating of their English language proficiency, which validates the previous findings concerning the debilitating role of language anxiety on language performance and achievement.

### 5.1 Implications

The study also offers some pedagogical implications such as suggestions to the language teachers for the use of role-plays, recasts and small group formation to lessen the worry of the students. There is also a need for special attention to be given to the female students to alleviate their nervousness in the presence of male students. The language teachers should also inform the students that committing mistakes is a natural part of learning and nothing to be ashamed of. There is also a dire need of using



communicative and task oriented activities in the classroom so that students become familiar with communicating in the target language and as a result feel less anxious in the situations that require verbal communication.

## 5.2 Limitations

The study suffers from certain limitations such as lack of qualitative tools. Interviews and observations can be included in a future study on L2 anxiety to validate the findings of the quantitative study. The current study was limited by time and financial constraints to a single university; hence premature to generalize on the basis of a limited sample. It is suggested to enlarge the sample size and include students from different institutes for further understanding of students' L2 anxiety.

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