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INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY, LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, AND ACHIEVEMENT OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: The current study aims at exploring general tendencies of emotional intelligence and language anxiety among Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, it attempts to find correlation among EI, FLA, learners' achievement as well as their self-rated proficiency. 82 Iranian EFL learners were randomly selected and required to take Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue–SF) questionnaire. They were also asked to self-rate their own English proficiency and take a General English achievement test. Results revealed that most participants (84.7%) developed moderate to high levels of EI, while only 15.3% of them suffered from a low level of EI. Concerning FLA, results indicated that 28% of learners experienced high levels of anxiety in English classes. Moreover, EI was found to be significantly correlated with achievement and self-rated proficiency and negatively correlated with FLA. Negative associations were also found among FLA with all other factors. Learners' English proficiency was significantly and positively correlated with their self-rated proficiency. Results in details as well as implications for foreign language teachers are further discussed.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence; Foreign Language Anxiety; Iranian foreign language learners; Self-rated proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies suggest that emotional intelligence (EI) may be even more beneficial for language learners than intelligence quotient (IQ) (Hasanzadeh & Shahmohamadi, 2011). As Sucaromana (2012) argue the impacts of emotional intelligence on language learning processes is positive through which good study behaviors can be promoted. Focusing on emotions in the classroom motivates both student and teachers to overcome difficulties in the learning process (Gates, 2000). It has been proved that learners with high levels of EI can develop better proficiency especially in standardized tests, and teachers who enjoy high EI can create stress-free and encouraging atmosphere in the classroom leading to facilitating learning conditions (Holt & Jones, 2005). Emotional intelligence skills should constitute a part of instruction so that learners can modify their anxiety and boost their performance (Gates, 2000).

Anxiety in learning a language is defined as a “state of apprehension, a vague fear” (Scovel, 1978: 134). Some researchers considered anxiety to be an impediment before language success (Arnold & Brown, 1999). However, others (e.g., Hurd, 2007; Aida 1994; Fung, 2005; Gregersen, 2003) explored anxiety as a factor that can facilitate learning processes. Despite many studies carried out, Sparks and Ganschow (2007) called for more investigations on the role of anxiety in language learning. Ghonsooly and Barghchi (2011) investigating association between reading anxiety and proficiency found no significant relationship between learners’ reading anxiety and reading ability. Farjami and Amerian (2012) found a reverse correlation between language anxiety and social self-efficacy. Still, literature on the association between emotional intelligence and foreign language anxiety is not rich, especially in Iranian EFL settings. To bridge the gap, the current study aims at uncovering correlation between EI, FLA, language achievement and self-rated proficiency of EFL learners.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined as the capacity to realize emotions, to sense and produce emotions to aid thought, to find out emotional knowledge, and to thoughtfully manage emotions in a way that emotional and intellectual development would be encouraged (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Theoretically talking, it is an idea claims to include all possible feelings and emotions as a unified structure (Goleman, 2001). Therefore, EI is theorized as facilitating individuals to perceive and modulate

negative emotions as well as to create and exert positive emotions in order to contribute to thinking process (Ciarrochi & Mayer, 2007). In fact, as Goleman (1995) believes, it controls an individual’s level of motivation, anger, and annoyance.

Considering language learning, MacIntyre (2002, pp.45-68) concludes that intense emotion can be created through language learning process; furthermore, emotion, as the fundamental basis of motivation, deserves more attention in language learning studies. Scovel (2000, p.140), insisting on the importance of emotion, states that “emotions might well be the factor that most influences language learning, and yet is the least understood by researchers in second language acquisition (SLA)”.

Most notably, negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear, and stress can greatly imperil optimal language learning, while positive emotions such as motivation, self-esteem, enjoyment, and empathy can largely provide optimal language learning capacity (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Stevick, 1995). As Pishghadam (2009) stated, Second language learners with higher emotional intelligence showed to better control their stress and anxiety and could maintain a positive attitude when they faced annoying situations during their learning process. Basically, EI postulates to predict learners’ reactions to the demands of contextually different learning situations and use of second language.

EI is measured in two different models (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). The ability model of EI intends to extract learners’ maximal performance on emotional information processing tasks by applying a merely cognitive measure. The trait model of EI tries to elicit behavioral tendencies and self-perceived abilities of learners by employing some self-report measures. Trait EI theory conforms to generally accepted theories of personality and is consistent with many research studies in different fields as well, such as rumination, life satisfaction, and coping styles (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Petrides and Furnham (2001, 2003), to empirically develop their theories, designed a research instrument, the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue), which repeatedly utilized in research works and discovered to be of high validity and reliability (Freudenthaler et al., 2008; Mikolajczak et al., 2007; Swami, Begum, & Petrides, 2010).

Many research works that emphasize the significance of EI for learning raised the question of the nature of foreign language anxiety (FLA). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined it as the feeling of nervousness and apprehension connected with second language learning contexts, specially speaking and listening practices. Horwitz and Cope

(1986) consider FLA situation-specific and see it as a distinct combination of self-perceptions, feelings, and behaviors connected with language classrooms. In other words, FLA differs from other forms of anxiety in other learning areas due to the linguistic and sociocultural requirements that learners should fulfill. According to Krashen (1980) who proposed the affective filter hypothesis to find the effect of anxiety on language learning, affective filter of second language learners with high anxiety is raised and consequently they are not able to completely process target language messages and fail to successfully develop their language acquisition. In the same way, MacIntyre (1995) suggested that anxiety in language learning distracts learners' attention and therefore reduces their cognitive performance that proceeds to impaired linguistic performance. Horwitz (1986) indicated that learners with high anxiety are likely to be self-conscious, cannot concentrate, and fear to make errors. Consequently, they will evade communicative contexts, become unable to remember things, suffer a mental block, and even have irrational ideas (Horwitz et al., 1986; Tobias, 1979).

Regarding the correlation among EI, FLA, and language performance, it is plausibly concluded that learners with high EI can control their emotions, cope with stress, say confidently what they want or believe, and achieve communicative demands of a foreign language situations (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008); in fact, they are less likely to suffer FLA and have a lower affective filter. Dewaele et al. (2008) have confirmed the relationships between EI and FLA in a research examined the effects of trait EI and sociobiographical variables on communicative anxiety and FLA among 464 adult multilinguals. They noticed that FLA was conversely correlated with EI and connected with sociobiographical variables such as context of acquisition, and frequency of use.

Theoretical and practical implications of these sorts of researches would be of great help for educational systems whose EFL learners, even high achievers, have little opportunity to speak English outside the classroom or might fear to communicate in public. Needless to say, it is critically important to address their emotional needs and feelings and lessen possible threats during language learning process and help them become successful language learners and users. Wang (2005, p.2) asserted that "success in language learning is largely connected with how teachers take care of students' emotional needs. When students' emotional needs are met, then students in turn concentrate on learning the language".

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are Iranian EFL learners' emotional intelligence and foreign language anxiety status?
2. How do Iranian learners' EI, FLA, their achievement, and their self rated proficiency correlate?

4. METHOD

4.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants for this study include 82 Iranian undergraduate students (29 males and 53 females) randomly selected from among students majoring a variety of university fields (Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Agriculture, Engineering). Students who were all majoring at an Iranian university aged from 18 to 23. They were all required to take General English Course for 150 minutes a week throughout an educational semester.

To obtain more reliable answers from the participants, they were asked to complete the questionnaires in the final week of the semester. The questionnaires include Persian translated version of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire– Short Form (TEIQue–SF) and the Horwitz et al., (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The participants were informed that the questionnaires were used to gather information about their anxiety as well as emotional intelligence. However, to leave the psychological barriers and to keep with the anonymity and privacy standards, the participants were ensured that their names and answers to the questionnaires were going to remain undisclosed. In addition to the questionnaires, students were required to answer the question "how do you judge your English?" on a 5- point Likert scale in order to self-rate their proficiency in English.

4.2. Instruments

The current study employed two well-known questionnaires: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue–SF). The first instrument used in the study, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a well-established scale developed by Horwitz et al., (1986), is a consistent measure to weigh classroom anxiety of foreign and second language learners. The questionnaire was used in many other researches in various learning settings (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2008; Mak, 2011; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). The FLCAS includes 33 items with responses a 5-point Likert scale, from "strongly

disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5).” Therefore, the total possible score can range from 33 (strongly disagree for all 33 items) to 165 (strongly agree for all 33 items). Scores from 132 to 165 indicates high anxiety; scores between 99 and 132 signify an average anxiety; and scores from 33 to 99 denote little or no anxiety. FLCAS questionnaire originally discriminates sources of language anxiety into three main types (Horwitz et al., 1986): communication apprehension (apprehension about communicating with others in second/foreign language); test anxiety (fear of failure in exams); and fear of negative evaluation (fear of negative evaluation by others).

In several studies (for example Aida, 1994; Liu & Jackson, 2008), the FLCAS questionnaire has proved to have a high internal consistency (above .90) its test-retest reliability was reported .80 in Aida’s (1994) study and .83 in Horwitz (1986). Reliability of the FLCAS in the current study was .92. Many studies (e.g., Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Rodriguez & Abreu, 2003) have supported validity of the FLCAS questionnaire. From 33 items on the FLCAS, eight items (2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22 and 28) are negatively worded; therefore, responses to them were reversed.

The second measurement scale used in this study, is the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue). It is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Completely Disagree (1)” to “Completely Agree (7).” Consequently, the total possible score can range from 30 (completely disagree for all items) to 210 (completely agree for all items). Score of 150 and more signifies a well-developed emotional intelligence; scores ranging from 120 to 150 denote a moderately developed emotional intelligence; and score of 120 and less indicates the underdeveloped emotional intelligence. The TEIQue-SF, comprised of 30 items is the short form of the TEIQue. The questionnaire measures global trait emotional intelligence as well as self-control, well-being, sociability and emotionality.

The internal consistency of the TEIQue-SF is reported to be above .80 (Kaiqi Shao et al., 2013). Cronbach’s alpha for reliability of the TEIQue-SF questionnaire in the present study was found to be .86. Researchers (e.g., Freudenthaler et al., 2008; Mikolajczak et al., 2007) have generally confirmed the validity of the TEIQue-SF questionnaire. Items (2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 22, 25, 26, and 28) on the TEIQue-SF are negatively worded; therefore, responses to them were reversed.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Descriptive statistics

To make general picture of students’ status concerning FLA and EI, descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum were measured. As it is presented in Table 1, mean of students’ scores on FLCAS test was found 97.3 which falls close but below the average level of anxiety (99) suggesting that the anxiety level of the participants regarding the English class is generally low. However, more detailed analysis revealed that a 28% of the students reported a high degree of anxiety (132 and more). This finding goes in line with what reported by Liu and Jackson (2008). Table 1 also indicates that students’ scores on the FLA scale varied significantly (39-153, SD=21.36), suggesting that students compose heterogeneous classrooms regarding their anxiety levels. However, nearly half of them (48%) reported a moderate level of anxiety. Mean of the participants’ scores on EI was calculated 143.4 indicating that students generally believed that they recognize their own emotional states as well as others’, and can modify their emotions as required by various environments. As Table 1 indicates, only 15.3% of the students reported to be low on EI scale, while 60.7% of them judged themselves as having a developed EI. Difference between minimum and maximum scores of the students on this scale (76-191, SD=20.09) denotes that while some of the students judge themselves as highly emotionally competent, some others suffer from low EI.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics on FLA and EI scales

Variable	mean	SD	Min	Max	% of low	% of moderate	% of high
FLA	97.3	21.36	39	153	24	48	28
EI	143.4	20.09	76	191	15.3	60.7	24

5.2. Correlations FLA and EI with Achievement and Self-Rated Proficiency

In order to find the relationships among EI, FLA, achievement, and self-rated proficiency, correlation analysis was run using SPSS software. To obtain more accurate results, p-value was set on the stringent level of 0.01. Results of Product Pearson

analysis among the variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Correlations among FLA, EI, Achievement, and Proficiency

Variable	1	2	3	4
EI	-			
FLA	-0.627	-		
Achievement	0.328	-0.406	-	
Self-rated Proficiency	0.493	0.457	0.547	-

As Table 2 indicates, scores of students on FLA and EI scales ($r=0.627$, $p < 0.01$) found to be negatively and significantly correlated. In other words, those participants whose FLA score was higher, tended to score lower on EI. This finding supports what others (e.g., Chuan-Ta's, 2003; Kaiqi Shao et al., 2013) reported suggesting that students who could manage their emotions more efficiently in various environments, suffered from much less degrees of anxiety in English class. Similarly, students' achievement on the General English final test was significantly and negatively correlated to their scores on FLA questionnaire ($r=0.406$, $p < 0.01$). This finding gives support to Argaman and AbuRabia's (2002) study that reported negative impact of language anxiety on language performance. In addition, a negative and significant association was found between self-rated proficiency of the participants and their anxiety ($r=0.457$, $p < 0.01$). Such negative relationships were also found in other studies (Clement & Kruidenier, 1985; MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement, & Noels, 1998; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999).

On the other hand, students' scores on Emotional Intelligence scale were found to be positively and significantly correlated with their achievement on General English final test ($r=0.328$, $p < 0.01$). Shao, et al., (2012) reported the same positive association of learners' emotional competence and English achievement. In addition, a positive and significant correlation was found between students' EI and their self-rated proficiency ($r=0.493$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that students with high emotional competence tended to rate their proficiency with a more optimistic view.

Finally, participants' achievement on General English final test revealed a positive and significant correlation with their self-rated English competence ($r=0.547$, $p < 0.01$). In other words, those who had a positive self-image of their language abilities achieved higher scores in English tests. This finding,

too, goes in line with what MacIntyre, et al., (1997) reported.

6. DISCUSSION

The current study revealed that nearly 84.7% of the participants showed high or average levels of emotional intelligence, however, 28% of them felt highly anxious in English classroom. Although most of Iranian students participated in the current study judged themselves as being able to manage their emotions appropriately, their scores found to be higher than those of Chinese counterparts (Kaiqi Shao et al., 2013) and lower than German learners (Freudenthaler et al., 2008). Findings of the present study go in line with other work. In line with those studies (Goleman, 2001; MacIntyre, 1995, 2002), significant relationships among participants' emotional intelligence, their foreign language anxiety, their English achievement, and their self-rated English proficiency were explored. In general, the study suggests that English learners who developed a higher level of EI tended to experience lower degrees of language anxiety and managed to achieve higher degrees of English proficiency. These findings confirm what reported by other researchers (e.g., MacIntyre, 1995). Foreign language learners who developed higher levels of EI were found to be able to manage their learning stress and self-motivate themselves (Pishghadam, 2009). It can be generally induced that learners might best utilize their emotional strategies to decrease anxiety in English classrooms, to get themselves efficiently concentrated on language learning processes, to produce better learning outcomes, and to boost their self-confidence (Clement, 1986; MacIntyre, 1995). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) also reported that language learners with high levels of anxiety tend to underestimate their proficiency.

Still, other studies (MacIntyre, 2002; Scovel, 2000; Kaiqi Shao et al., 2013) also reported the mitigating influence of FLA on EI and learners' language achievement as well as self-rated proficiency suggesting that emotions have key roles in determining motivation and anxiety as well as other affective variables. This study, however, did not find supporting evidence for the mediating effects of these variables on each other or achievement.

However, the positive and significant correlation between participants' EI and self-rated English proficiency served as the unique finding of the current study. Results of the present study suggest that those learners who developed high levels of emotional intelligence tended to judge themselves as more proficient language learners. Implications of

this finding can go for both researchers as well as language teachers. Interested researchers may wish to further explore roots of this association in addition to discover other unexplored factors influenced by EI. On the other hand, language teachers can bear in mind the significant impacts of EI on various dimensions of learning processes and learners' attitudes (Sparks & Ganschow (2007).

As Brackett & Katulak (2007) assert an effective strategy to boost language learning, and to create in students a positive attitude and overwhelm negative ones is to make sure that teachers, regardless of learners, develop high levels of EI and have low FLA. Ghanizateh and Moafian (2010) found a positive correlation between high EL levels of teachers and learners success in language learning. In addition, exploring FLA, Horwitz (1996) found that high levels of FLA in teachers can significantly raise learners' anxiety.

Developing a sense of humor and establishment of a friendly and stress-free environment, as Rouhani (2008) argues, can motivate students to engage in speaking activities in classrooms. Price's (1991) and Young's (1990) reported that teachers with a sense of humor who could create a friendly environment were judged by learners to be most helpful in decreasing high levels of foreign language anxiety. Liu and Jackson (2008) argue that as a solution to the problem of high anxiety and low emotional intelligence, teachers can employ direct discussions with their students' perceptions about FLA and EI. Such discussions can serve as beneficial tools to uncover the elements that provoke learners' anxiety and reduce their EI levels. By exploring factors responsible for learners' failure, teachers can develop learning environment where lack of stress and psychological pressure as well as existence of empathy may lead to learners' success (Shao, et al., 2012). Moreover, as Horwitz (1988) and Nelis et al. (2009) argue, teachers may wish to assist their students to determine realistic objectives for enhancing their EI and decreasing anxiety. Mayer and Salovey (2007) believe that if teachers intend to boost emotional stability of their learners, it comes inevitable for them to monitor learners' emotional status in classrooms and to coordinate their own actions, such as giving feedback or error correction, according to learners' conditions. For instance, Young (1990) advises teachers to use positive statements when correcting students' errors and avoid negative feedbacks.

Journal writing, games, role play, and group discussion are some of strategies that can be employed by teachers to boost emotional status of learners (Nelis et al., 2009; Rouhani, 2008). As Shao et al. (2012) suggest these activities can ease high

levels of anxiety and boost their willingness to communicate. These activities can serve beneficial especially for Iranian students who learn English as a foreign language, do not have constant contact with native speakers, and usually lack linguistic interactions outside classrooms.

7. CONCLUSION

Affective variables and their associations with second/foreign language learning have been long researched. Many studies explored impacts of each one of the separate variables, however, only some of them attempted to survey effects of two or more variables simultaneously. Fewer studies also explored interrelationships of these variables in the form of correlation. The current study explored two of these variables aiming at uncovering their impacts on language learners as well as finding any associations between the variables. Moreover, correlation among the variables and language proficiency and achievement was sought. Results revealed that EI is positively and significantly correlated with language achievement of Iranian EFL learners and their self-rated English proficiency. FLA, on the other hand, demonstrated a negative and significant association with achievement and proficiency. In addition, data analysis indicated a negative link between EI and FLA. Finally, learners' self-rated proficiency was found to be positively correlated with their English achievement.

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