Effects of learners’ individual differences on test anxiety among the students majoring in translation in Islamic Azad University of Abadan

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Abstract

The present survey investigated the correlations between learners’ individual differences (IDs) included motivation, attitudes, state anxiety, age, gender and translation test anxiety (TTA) among the students’ majoring in translation at the university level. The research was a correlation study and the design was basically descriptive. Research questions and hypotheses focused on discovering the possible correlations of TTA and participants’ IDs. Research sample included 300 male and female participants who were junior college Translation students enrolled translation courses in Abadan Islamic Azad University in spring semester, 2011. They were selected based on stratified random sampling among the whole research population. Research instruments were Arends’ (1998) Motivation Questionnaire, Surveying Students about Classroom Life, and Gorjian’s (2011) Test Anxiety Inventory for Translation Students (TAITS). Data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics (i.e., Regression Analysis and Independent Samples t-test) through SPSS 11.5 software. The results showed that there were significant correlation between TTA and learners’ motivation, attitudes, and state anxiety (p<.01) while there were not significant correlation between TTA, attitude, age and gender (p<.05). The findings also revealed the significant difference between males and females’ degree of TTA. Females showed higher anxiety level at TTA than their male counterparts.

Keywords: individual differences (IDs), EFL learners, translation, motivation, attitude, state anxiety, age, gender

1. Introduction

The purpose of this project was to better understand the social, educational, and contextual dimensions of language test anxiety. With the trend towards globalization and internationalization on university campuses around the world, language tests are utilized extensively as powerful decision-making tools. Inferences drawn by decision-makers about test-takers’ language abilities based on the scores from such tests may result in high-stakes decisions such as university admission, program placement, graduation, and immigration to English-speaking countries. Among the factors that may potentially influence language test anxiety (LTA), learners’ motivation, state anxiety, attitudes, age, and gender could be highly considered to be mutable factors, that is, the increase of certain orientations and the decrease of language test anxiety can help test-takers perform better in language tests. Further, research indicates that current theories regarding these psychological and biological attributes were developed and validated separately and within English as a foreign language (EFL) social and educational contexts and may not hold cross-contextually.

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Therefore, objective of the present study is to investigate the learner variables which affect testing anxiety at the university level in our country. The role of English in achieving future objectives depends on a deep understanding of learners’ variables which affect the ways of test taking as well as the ways of thinking and behaving.

Similarities between English as a foreign/second (EFL/ESL) models encouraged the scholars to focus on English as an International language (EIL) which covers both aspects of EFL/ESL functions and properties. These variables can be assumed as affective such as motivation, attitudes, state anxiety, biological such as sex, age, cognitive such as aptitude and instructional variables such as teaching techniques (TTs) and teachers’ views on classroom management (TVCM) concerning language testing (Krashen, Scarcella & Long, 1979). Learner variables can determine the level of language testing anxiety and eventually affect English language achievement (Ellis, 2005). All these variables may affect the increase or decrease of LTA in EFL/ESL contexts. The focus of learning English is shifting from native like competence to international intelligibility; therefore, the term EFL may need to be changed into EIL. This may affect the function of English as an international language with which people from various nationalities can communicate with each other (Coleman, 1996).

2. Background

Researchers (e.g., Dunkin & Biddle, 1975) have examined students’ variables and related strategies employed by effective versus ineffective foreign language learners in test taking period. They noted that the major concern in education today is to improve the language achievement of Iranian language learners in universities. However, Iranian students continue to lag behind academically and experience difficulties in the areas of English language learning. The main concern of this study is to examine the effect of Individual Differences (IDs) on LTA (Madrid, 1993). Since L2 learners behave differently when they take the L2 tests, knowing the most effective IDs on LTA could be fruitful in reducing the LTA degree among university students. Discussions about how to improve foreign language achievement among university students learning English continue to be framed within a debate regarding the effectiveness of interaction through the native language versus the need for acquiring English (August & Hakuta, 1997). The main problem has so far been the lack of enough knowledge regarding these variables and their roles in L2 testing. Individual variables influencing learning processes among university students appear in Table1.

| Table 1. Learner variables influencing English language testing |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| (Extracted from Coleman, 1996; Ehrman, 1996; Ellis, 1994; Gorjian, 2006) |
| Affective Domain | Cognitive Domain | Biological Domain | Linguistic Domain | Circumstance Domain | Instructional Domain |
| Motivation | Antitude | Sex | Initial Proficieny, Level | Type / Role | TTs |
| Attitudes | Learning Style | Age | Class Situation (Context) | TVCM |
| State Anxiety | Learning strategies |
| Personality |
| Acculturation and Culture Shock |

Note: The bold typed variables are involved in the present investigation.

The above variables are not necessarily independent of each other even though this might appear to be the case, as, for example, attitudes and motivation. These two are reciprocally interrelated (Oxford, 1990). Perhaps more investigations are needed to discover these domains. In fact, there is little empirical evidence regarding the reciprocity of these variables affecting language testing anxiety (LTA). These are not discrete variables; rather, they are interwoven in L2 teaching-learning process. Although, these variables are separately categorized, in reality they merge, overlap and interact in extremely complex ways (Coleman, 1996; Ellis, 1994; Ehrman, 1996).

LTA may be the main cause of language teaching failure among the learners which refers to their psychological status rather than their learning status at the specific proficiency level. LTA may be considered as a loss in L2 learning which jeopardizes both teaching and testing processes. Thus, the main research questions are presented in the following section.

3.1 Research question

The research question refers to learner IDs affecting LTA in foreign language context in Iran. In the following section, we will define theoretical and operational key terms used in the present research. This study discovered the
relationships between learners’ variables including affective (here motivation, attitudes and state anxiety) and biological (here sex and age) variables and EFL learning.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the domains of L2 learner variables and LTA. L2 learners deal with L2 learning processes to facilitate L2 learning in the classroom situation. L2 achievement can take place through the reciprocal relationship between the variables of sex, age, motivation, attitudes and anxiety (Bernstein, 1971; Cook, 2001). It should be noted that learners’ motivation, attitudes, anxiety, sex and age were obtained from the pool of learner variables to narrow down the scope of the study.

4. Learner variables

Genesee (2000) emphasizes the awareness of individual variables among teachers and researchers who deal with EFL/ESL situations. They also need to provide the students with context-rich, meaningful and learner-centered EFL/ESL methods. Genesee (2000, p. 5) states that individual differences in learning style may not be a simple matter of personal preference, but rather of individual differences in the hardworking of the brain and, thus, beyond individual control. Ok (2003) emphasizes the knowledge of individual differences for both teachers and learners to be aware of their capabilities in learning EFL/ESL. Ok (2003, p. 3) notes that “Both students and teachers are well aware of the importance of studying English for gaining admission into a high school or a college as well as for further job opportunities.

Learner variables can affect teaching and learning strategies, learning styles and learning motivation, attitudes, the level of anxiety and aptitude. Cohen (1998) focuses on EFL teachers to activate learners’ strategies in learning EFL. He states “If teachers are willing, in fact, to act as change agents in the classroom shifting the responsibility for learning more onto the shoulders of the students themselves-they will actually be taking on series of roles (p.98).” Teachers would play the role of a diagnostician, a learner trainer, a coach, a coordinator, a language learner, and a researcher (Willing, 1988; Oxford, 1990; Harris, 1993; Widdowson, 1990). Learner variables can be reviewed in seven surveys in Table 2.

Table 2. Learners’ IDs influencing LTA

| (Altman, 1980) | (Chastain, 1988) | (Marton, 1988) | Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) | Skehan (1991) | (Brown, 1994) | (Coleman, 1997) | Gorjian (2006) |
|---------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| Age | Age | Age | Age | Age | Age | Age | Age |
| Sex | Sex | Sex | Sex | Sex | Sex | Sex | Sex |
| Attitudes | Attitudes | Attitudes | Attitudes | Motivation | Motivation | Motivation | Motivation |
| Motivation | Motivation | Motivation | Motivation | Anxiety | Anxiety | Anxiety | Anxiety |
| Age | Age | Age | Age | Age | Age | Age | Age |

A short review of the above learner variables illustrated in Tables 2 reveals that Attitudes and motivation have received much attention. The present study will focus on both learner variables concerning the above surveys to narrow down the scope of the study. There are other scholars who dealt with these variables; however, we will mention a few of them by way of saving time and space.

According to Arends (1998) and Scrivener (1994), the studies concerning individual differences have emphasized students’ variables affecting L2 learning. There are a few studies, which deal with L2 teachers’ variables affecting L2 achievement. In other words, L2 teachers need to provide their students with learning-centered approaches that support them in learning and developing teaching processes (Scrivener, 1994). Three components of LTA framework are reciprocally interrelated.

5. Methodology

5.1. Subjects

The study was conducted at Azad University of Abadan. A total of intermediated EFL students participated in this investigation. Sample research included 300 (Male=150, Female=150) Iranian EFL students who were chosen among 650 at the B.A level majoring in English language Translation based on stratified random sampling among
20 classrooms. They were males and females with the age range of 22. They participated in the final exams on translation courses in spring semester, 2011.

5.2. Research Instrument
Translation English Anxiety Questionnaire (TEAQ) developed by Gorjian (2011) was used. The questionnaire consisted of 40 items. The scale is a self-report measure of language learners’ feelings of test anxiety in relation to the translation skill i.e., either rendering from English to Persian or vice versa at the final exam. TEAQ is based on a Likert-type scale with five possible responses to each of the questions. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated and it was found as ($\alpha = .78$). This finding indicates that this instrument has appropriate reliability to be used for the purposes of the study. TEAQ was administered as pre-post anxiety questionnaire to indicate the translation test anxiety level before and after the semester among junior Translation university students.

5.3. Procedure
In this study, the data was collected by means of TEAQ at the pre-test and post-test. Their pre-test was conducted at the first session following the completion of the TEAQ. Exactly at the end of the fall semester, 2011, they were asked to answer the TEAQ again and returned it to their class instructors. The questionnaire copies were coded to observe the students’ privacy. Thus the pre and post-test questionnaire could be matched to find out the consistency level of state and test anxiety level. Then they were asked to complete the TEAQ for another time in order to find out whether there was a relationship between their translation test anxiety level before and after the semester which may indicate the participants’ consistency on answering the TEAQ and final grades of achievement in the listening exam and also the amount of anxiety experienced by the students in experimental group and control group.

5.4. Data Analysis
The raw scores of subjects from TEAQ were computed through appropriate measures. Four statistical tests were used: (1). KR-21 formula was used to measure the reliability of TEAQ; (2) A Paired Samples t-test was used to analyze the level of translation test anxiety (TTA) before and after the semester to see whether there is a significant difference between them concerned with null hypothesis rejection; and (3) A Pearson Product-Moment Coefficient Correlation was used to determine the correlation between the level of TTA and learners’ IDs on their translation achievement test score.

6. Results
The correlations between the TTA and IDs were analyzed to indicate the effects of the variables on one another as presented in Table 3.

| Variables | Learners’ IDs Pearson Correlation | TTA Pearson Correlation |
|-----------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Learners’ IDs | 1 | -750** |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| N | 300 | 300 |
| TTA | -750** | 1 |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | 000 | |
| N | 300 | 300 |

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

As it is shown in Table 4, generally there is a negative relationship between TTA performance and IDs, implying that the relationship between them is significant at ($p < 0.01$).

| Variables | Learners’ IDs Pearson Correlation | TTA Pearson Correlation |
|-----------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Learners’ IDs | 1 | -641** |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| N | 300 | 300 |
| TTA | -641** | 1 |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | 000 | |
| N | 300 | 300 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Table 4 indicated that, generally there is a negative relationship between IDs and TTA, implying that the relationship between the anxiety and the listening skill is negatively significant at ($p< 0.01$). Independent Samples $t$-test also showed no significant difference between the participants’ gender and age views age and gender on the level of learners’ LTA.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The results indicated males and females agreed on the effects of motivation, attitudes, state anxiety variables significantly; however, they did not agree on the role of gender and age on the effects of their IDs on TTA level ($p<0.01$). This study presents recommendations for further research which were not focused here since the departure point of this study was fixed on specific learners’ IDs, but they may be taken up as the starting point for further studies. The results of this study clearly indicated the existence of high levels of TTA in most of the learners who were taking the translation exams. Although this study has addressed some issues regarding the role of IDs affecting TTA in foreign language translation testing, it may provide a model through which the level of TTA could be measured (Gorjian, 2011) TTA awareness may help translation course practitioners especially and teachers generally to be familiar with the level of their learners’ test anxiety and consider it greatly in scoring the learners’ papers and their oral presentations.

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