



# The Effect of Life Syllabus on Iranian EFL Learners' Anxiety and their Proficiency

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**Abstract:** *This paper studied the effect of Life Syllabus on Iranian EFL students for decreasing anxiety. The aim of this research was to know whether there is any difference between Life Syllabus when a teacher used in the class to reduce anxiety or not. 76 English learners and 4 English instructors of Parsian English institute and Farhang English institute participated in this study. A quasi-experimental research approach with interview followed in this research. A pre-test and post-test with the control and experimental group conducted to get participants' performance before and at the end of using Life Syllabus. The study lasted for one term with naturalistic use of Life Syllabus for experimental group. The comparison between the students' scores showed that there was a difference in the final performance of two groups. As a result, this research supports that the Life Syllabus reduces the EFL learners' anxiety. As Life Syllabus proved to be useful with Iranian EFL learners, EFL teachers also can adopt the technique in their classes to advance their students' language learning.*

**Key words:** *Life Syllabus, Anxiety, EFL*

## INTRODUCTION

Whitehead (Whitehead, A. N. , 1929) says that based on humanistic educators the final aim of education is leading students toward a good life and focusing on the issues of life. Quite in line with humanistic educators Pishghadam's paper (2011) brought a new flash on the changing ambit of ELT for thinking about second language and its educational nature. In fact, Pishghadam (Pishghadam, R., 2011) says that it is time to have revision in ELT. In this view, he claims that, ELT has expanded in maturity over years, establishing an independent identity for itself. Also, it is not the second part of Applied Linguistics, he presented a new idea into English Language teaching and learning via a superiority seen in the educational ambit of ELT classes as Applied ELT.

Moreover, Pishghadam (Pishghadam, R., 2011) explains the ELT class features to improve life skills for solving socio-psychological problems such as anxiety, stress, etc. As Pishghadam and Zabihi[3] highlighted distinctive features including, (a) conversing different topics about political, social and scientific issues, (b) having group work and pair work activities, (c) comparing two cultures, (d) getting acquainted with the words and grammar of another language, (e) speaking other languages in which one can show their own real self, (f) taking language learning very seriously, and (g) having a funny and friendly atmosphere for learning.

Pishghadam (Pishghadam, R., 2011) has brought into play the idea that Applied ELT involves two sides of applied and theoretical. Therefore, he proposed life syllabus classified in Applied ELT. Pishghadam, Zabihi, & Kermanshahi (Pishghadam, R. et al., 2012) claims that based on life syllabus, we should have life issues

in ELT curriculum, highlighting these aspects and enhancement about language proficiency of learners. A main aspect in applied ETL focuses on going around life issues, like critical thinking, creativity and anxiety (Pishghadam, R. et al., 2012; Baghaei, P. et al., 2012; Hosseini, A. et al., 2012; Pishghadam, R. et al., 2012).

Hosseini and Navari (Hosseini, A. et al., 2012) say that ELT classes mind to students emotionally problems and share them the rules to prevail such emotional barriers like anxiety or depression. After that prolongation Pishghadam and Zabihi (Pishghadam, R. et al., 2013) have presented a new notion in ELT as English for life purposes (ELP). ELP includes different kind of life skills, such as, "motivation to learn, emotional intelligence, critical thinking ability or creativity, learners' anxiety, neuroticism, and depression or burnout" (p. 6). The attention of ETL changed from considering learners' specific needs to enhance life qualities in different topics for discussion that enable learners to compare the other cultures with their home culture and emboss their identities.

It not only allays learners' anxiety, depression or other but also enables teachers to improve learners' emotional, intellectual, and motivational abilities while teaching them a second/foreign language. As stated in Pishghadam (Pishghadam, R. , 2011), the target has altered from a language syllabus, i.e. language-and-life classes, towards life syllabus, i.e. life-and-language classes, wherein language pays more attention on policy of education for life and enhancing life qualities of the classroom. Byrne and Rosenman (Byrne, D.G. et al., 1990), Stein (Stein, D.J. (2004) Griffin, Tyrrell and Thi Thu Trang (Thi Thu Trang, T. , 2012) have claimed that anxiety is powerful of all human emotions. The effect that this strong negative affect applies over the lives of people cannot be amplified. The decisions that individuals make, and the actions they avoid are all, almost determined by their motivations to stop or diminish feelings of anxiety (Scovel, T. , 1978 ; Spielberg, C. D. , 1983).

The study investigates the role of anxiety and students' participation in the class. The aim is to see how anxiety relates to participation of the students in the classrooms. First of all, the subjects of the study are described. Next, instruments and materials are described. Lastly, the procedures for collection of data with statistic analysis are presented.

## **2. Research Design**

The design is quasi- experimental along with questionnaires and interviews used in this research. A pre-test and post -test with the control and experimental group conducted to get participants' performance before and at the end of using Life Syllabus

### **2.1. Participants**

Participants are a sample of 76 advanced and intermediate learners and 4 English instructors of foreign language (EFL) from the language learners of Parsian English institute and Farhang English institute in Bandar Abbas, Iran. Two of the instructors have MA degrees the others have BA degrees. The learners are males and females from 15 to 25 years old. The aim for choosing the institutes is for the nature of study, formal education is not quite effective in Iran; therefore, a large people's preference for learning English is going to language institutes since it is the most practical way of language learning. To select the participants, two criteria will be taken into consideration. First, they are required to agree in taking part in this research. Second, they fill out the questionnaire in advance. Participants assigned into two groups (intermediate and advanced) based on a standardized Oxford proficiency tests to see the relationship between anxiety and the language levels of the students. Twenty-six were female and fifty which means 65.8% of them were male

## **2.2 Instruments**

This study used quantitative and qualitative method. For the quantitative part, an Oxford proficiency test for dividing learners into intermediate and advanced levels was administrated. Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS ) questionnaire developed by Horwitz, Horwitz& Cope [13] was administered For pre-test. The FLCAS was examined for validity and reliability by one of its authors Horwitz[14].The scale has been administered to a number of studies at Texas University has shown satisfactory reliability with 300 populations. The results revealed test-retest reliability over eight weeks( $r= 0.83$ ,  $p< 0.001$ ,  $n =78$ ). The FLCAS has also demonstrated internal consistency with alpha coefficient of .93. In short, the FLCAS is considered to be reliable and valid for measuring the subjects' foreign language anxieties. Post- test questionnaire is composed of twenty-eight items about anxiety and the student's participation in classroom. The questionnaire used from Mejias, Applbaum and Trotter II [15]. This questionnaire is also a five point Likert Scale, ranging from never to always.

## **3. Results**

The aim of this research is to clear up the role of positive effect of Life Syllabus on the anxiety of the learners. The results are about Teachers' and students' perceptions about students' participation and anxiety, and Expectations of Teachers about Students' Participation and their Speaking in the classroom

### **3.1 Students' and teachers' perceptions about students' participation and anxiety**

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was the next questionnaire by Horwitz, et al (Horwitz, E. K. et al., 1986). The data were analyzed by SPSS. Also, Pearson and point-biserial correlation methods were used in this research as the main tools to analyze the data and to get the relationships between variables.

It is important to note that, although this questionnaire included questions concerning perceptions of students about anxiety, the result was not in analyses, since the preliminary analyses on this showed that there was a correlation between perceptions of students about anxiety and FLCAS, so in all the following analyses, the only measure anxiety of students is FLCAS.

In the first section for analysis of data, teachers' and students' perceptions about students' participation and anxiety were studied. Pearson correlation method was used in this section to analyze the data and to get any relationship between: a) perceptions of students about their participation and anxiety b) teachers' and students' perceptions about participation of students c) perceptions of teachers about the participation of students and perceptions of students about their participation in classes d) perceptions of teachers about the anxiety of students and perceptions of students about their participation e) perceptions of teachers about the anxiety of students and perceptions of teachers about their participation of the students. The analysis of the results discusses for each the above items separately in the following sections.

The aim for the first analysis was to see the relationship between Teachers' and students' perceptions about participation of students and anxiety of students. To do so, perceptions of students about their participation and perceptions of teachers about the participation of students' and anxiety were matched with the anxiety of the students that measured by FLCAS. The result placed in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation between Teachers' and Students' Perceptions About Participation of Students with FLCAS

| Variables   | FLCAS  | Significance |
|---|--------|--------------|
| Perceptions of Students About their Participation     | - .431 | .000         |
| Perceptions of Teachers About Perceptions of Students | - .177 | .127         |

Note: FLCAS = Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

The results in table.1 indicate, there was a moderate and negative correlation between perceptions of students about their participation and anxiety. ( $r = -.431, p < .001$ ). This findings advice more students perceived themselves as anxious, the less they perceived themselves participating in class. However, perceptions of teachers about students' participation correlated very weakly with anxiety. ( $r = -.177, p < .127$ ). The correlation was not significant. Thus, there was no correlation between Teachers' and students' perceptions about participation of students with FLCAS. In this result students and teachers have different opinions about classroom participation, and participation may means different things to them. This seems to be supported by later analyses on the teachers and students perceptions about participation and speaking in English class. If participation of students and anxiety be related, as this research and has shown, these findings argue that students' judging about the degree of participation in the class seems to be better than their teachers. The aim of next analysis was about the relationship between perception of teachers about the anxiety of students and FLCAS anxiety of foreign language that is measured. The aim of analysis is perceptions of teachers about the anxiety of students were correlated with FLCAS.

The results are placed in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Between Perceptions of Teachers About Anxiety of Students and FLCAS

| Variable  | FLCAS  | Significance |
|---|--------|--------------|
| Perceptions of Teachers About Anxiety of Students | - .121 | .299         |

Note: FLCAS = Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

The results showed that Perceptions of teachers about students' anxiety did not correlate highly with FLCAS anxiety ( $r = -.121, p < .299$ ). The result was not significant and the correlation degree was weak. This difference suggests that while students are more anxious, teachers may not and vice versa. So, it seems to be a difference between perceptions of anxiety for students than their teachers. In addition, the idea of teachers and students about the anxiety is different. The next analysis explored the relationships between perceptions of teachers about perceptions for their students and the perceptions of students about their participation.

The results are placed in table 3.

Table3: Students' and Teachers' Perceptions About Participation of Students

| Variable   | Perceptions of Students<br>About their Participation | Significance |
|--|--|--------------|
| Perceptions of Teachers About<br>Participation of Students | .441   | .000         |

Table 3 shows the correlation between perceptions of teachers about participation of their students and perceptions of students about their participation that correlated significantly ( $r = .441$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The correlation was positive and the degree of that was moderate. This suggests that perceptions of teachers about participation of their students and perceptions of students about their participation tend to match. The aim of the next analysis was about students' anxiety and perceptions of teachers about student participation. The analysis of result is given in Table 4.

Table 4 Perceptions of Teachers About Anxiety and Participation of Students

| Variable   | Perceptions of Teachers<br>About Participation of Students | Significance |
|--|--|--------------|
| Perceptions of Teachers About<br>Anxiety of Students | - .609   | .000         |

Table 4 shows a high and negative relationship between perceptions of teachers about anxiety of students and perceptions of teachers about participation of students in classes. ( $r = -.609$ ,  $p < .001$ ). It means that perceptions of teachers about anxiety of students and participation of students connected. In other words, the more the teachers perceived their students as anxious, the less they perceived them participation in activity of the class.

### 3.2 Expectations of Teachers about Participation of Students and Students' Speaking in Class Discussions

This section analyzes the relationship between perceptions of students about students' participation and expectations of teachers about participation of students in class discussions. It also analyzes the relationship between perceptions of students about students' participation and expectations of teachers about speaking of students in the classroom. Also, Pearson correlation method was used for studying the relationships between variables.

The results are placed in table 5.

Table 5: Relationship Between Expectations of Teachers About Participation of Students and Students' Speaking in English and Perceptions of Students About Students' Participation

| Variable   | Perceptions of Students<br>About Students' Participation | Significance |
|--|--|--------------|
| Expectations of Teachers About<br>Participation of Students in the Classroom | 0.112  | 0.334        |
| Expectations of Teachers About Speaking<br>of Students in the Classroom      | 0.075  | 0.519        |

As the table shows, expectations of teachers about participation of students in discussions did not correlate significantly with perceptions of students about students' participation. ( $r = 0.112$ ,  $p < 0.334$ ). There was not any relationship between expectations about speaking of students in class discussions and perceptions of students about students' participation ( $r = .075$ ,  $p < 0.519$ ) either. This finding confirms the previous findings that students and teachers have different ideas about participation in the class. So, it may not true that the more teachers expect students to speak English in class discussions than the students participate in the discussions. Teachers may expect participation and speaking from all the class, however, students' perception might vary and depending on how they actually perceive to participate in discussions.

Table 6 shows the analysis of relationship between expectations of teachers about speaking participation of students in discussions.

Table 6: Relationship Between Expectations of Teachers about Participation of Students and Students' Speaking in the Classroom

| Variable   | Expectations of Teachers<br>About Participation of Students | Significance |
|--|---|--------------|
| Expectations of Teachers About<br>Speaking of Students<br>in the Classroom | 0.851   | 0.000        |

As the table indicates, expectations of teachers about speaking of students in discussions correlated highly and positively with expectations of teachers about participation of students in the class. ( $r = 0.851$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The degree was quite high and significant. The findings of this analysis suggest that teachers expected students to speak in discussions when they participate in the classroom.

#### 4. Conclusion

In general, the result seems to support some studies that have been worked on language anxiety and participation. It also shows affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, self-confidence correlate highly with participation. Kaya's (1995) study also shows the relationship between anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, extroversion / introversion and class participation. Based on the result all the variables correlated significantly with participation. Also anxiety correlated with participation but negatively, indicating that anxious students participate less in class. MacIntyre, Gardner (MacIntyre, P. D. et al., 1991) stated that motivation and anxiety are two separate aspects of learner behavior that overlaps with each other. Anxiety may reduce motivation and the consequence of it makes poor participation. In this study, students who perceive themselves as more anxious and less participants it seems then those students are less motivated or unmotivated. Schumann (Schumann, J. H., 1999) claims that anxiety is high when motivation is less. He also believes that if a student is unmotivated, then that student seems having high anxiety and less participation or even no participation in classes.

#### 4.1 Implications for Language Teachers

Teachers should knowing about language anxiety that affects participation of students in English classes and anxiety in process of learning regardless of students' age, sex, ability and language level. That's why teachers should prepare their lessons and activities taking the affective variables into consideration. Teachers may use Language Learning approaches that create less anxiety-producing environments, with a friendly and comfortable mood that the students will enjoy learning and the results will be more productive. Foss and Reitzel (Foss, K. A. et al., 1998) suggested some activities to reduce anxiety. For example, they think that teachers should explain about belief by indicating what beliefs interfere with language learning. They call this approach "rational emotive therapy". Students select three beliefs from the list that seem best describe his/her anxiety to work on them. "Agony column" activity is helpful in alleviating students' anxiety in language learning (Crookall, D. et al., 1991). In this activity, students individually write a letter to the Agony column, expressing their anxiety and difficulty in learning foreign language. The letters shared among students and students have to reply to their fellow student's letter. Students' letters can be read by their instructors, too. Students can get different replies which they might find useful or just the opposite may occur.

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