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## Effects of Negative Affective Factors on Learning EFL at Thamar University

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### Abstract

Affective factors, also known as emotional factors, can positively or negatively influence learning. Negative feedback, situation, or experience would lead to the learners' unpleasant, depressing, or harmful attitude. The present study examined the effects of negative affective factors on Yemeni English as a foreign language (EFL, henceforth) undergraduate learners in the English Language Department, Faculty of Education, Thamar University. The study sample comprised 20 participants (9 males and 11 females) who presented their views on the negative affective factors they experienced during their language study. To collect the data, the interview method was executed as a study instrument with six open-ended questions. The results revealed that anxiety and shyness are chief inhibitions to language learning. The negative effects of such factors were: lousy performance, less effective learning, weak exam results, hindrances in using the language in conversations, and sometimes failure in learning the language. Thus, anxiety and shyness were inhibitors to EFL learning, affecting the learning process of the four language skills and test performance. Based on the results, the affective factors considered in the analysis need to be treated. Hence, some strategies are suggested to help reduce the negative effects of the affective factors.

**Keywords:** EFL learners, negative affective factors, anxiety, shyness, Thamar University

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## Introduction

English as a foreign language is taught in several institutes and universities around the world. In Yemen, people learn this foreign language in an environment that could be more well-practiced and widespread. Unlike the first language (L1), in which a person is born with the ability to acquire it naturally (Brown, 2015), EFL is a very complex process that requires extraordinary efforts to have a good command of it. As English is a lingua franca, most native and non-native English speakers use it as their primary mode of communication in business matters and business organizations. The English language is used in nearly all disciplines worldwide, including science, engineering and technology, medicine, trade and commerce, scientific research, education, tourism, the internet, banking, business, advertising, the film industry, transportation, pharmacy, to name just a few (Parupalli, 2019). Learning EFL involves many considerations, such as psychological, cognitive, neurological, affective, and linguistic considerations (Brown, 2015). Most researchers who attempted to categorize these inter-individual variables agreed on cognitive, affective, metacognitive, and demographic factors (Olivares-Cuhat, 2010).

Affective factors, including emotions, feelings, self-esteem, extroversion, attitudes, inhibitions, introversion, and imitation, are important in learning EFL. According to Zeidner (1998), negative emotions tend to affect learners' motivation, attention and learning strategies. Goleman (1995) took a similar stance that "students who are anxious, angry or depressed do not learn; people who are caught in these states do not take in information efficiently or deal with it well" (p. 78). Many theoretical linguistics researchers, such as (Junjie & Ying-Liang, 2022; Liu & Luo, 2021; Elkhayma, 2020; Bao & Liu, 2019; Zayed & Al-Ghamdi, 2019; Deb, 2018; Edinne, 2013; Ni, 2012) in recent years have paid much attention to determining the influencing role of affective factors on learning EFL and have also done in-depth research and explored that from different aspects. According to Rastelli (2018), affections in the context of learning a foreign language refer to two facets of humans: the individual's personality and how they feel about themselves.

Based on the above, the present study aimed to (a) determine the effects of negative affective factors on foreign language learning among Yemeni EFL learners and (b) explore possible strategies that can be used to lessen those effects.

## Theoretical Background

Learners may experience tension, apprehension, worry, and self-doubt when learning and using a foreign language like English. Anxiety is an affective factor that brings these emotions to the fore. Anxiety is considered a challenge in learning, especially in speaking skills among introverted students (Srilakshmi et al., 2021). Language anxiety has three leading causes, according to Horwitz et al. (1986), particularly with the various kinds of second language (L2) activities that engage students in the classroom. Those causes include communication apprehension, test's anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. When learning a foreign language, communication apprehension-generally speaking, the anxiety experienced when speaking to others plays a significant role. To Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), "Learners' performance is constantly monitored by both their teachers and peers. Surely, most learners get anxious due to fear of tests. This is called test anxiety, which may lead to failure. Some students may also fear speaking English in class or doing any work because they fear being judged or made fun of by their teachers or classmates. This is called fear of negative evaluation.

Another compelling factor that has received ample attention in the literature and has been extensively researched is shyness (Chu, 2008). Shyness is becoming an increasingly widespread trait (Bashosh, 2013). Carducci and Zimbardo (1995) maintain that shyness can be categorised as social anxiety. As a result, several scholars have highlighted the detrimental implications of shyness in acquiring other languages. Shyness can have a

significant impact on foreign language learners of English. For many learners, speaking in a foreign language can be a daunting and anxiety-inducing task, especially for those who are naturally shy or introverted. One of the main challenges that shy learners of English face is a need for more confidence in their ability to communicate effectively in the language. Learners feel shy and want to refrain from speaking in front of the classroom (Farooqui, 2007). They may be hesitant to speak up in class, participate in group discussions, or even make small talk with native speakers. This can lead to a lack of practice and less exposure to the language, further perpetuating feelings of shyness and insecurity.

Another issue that shy learners may encounter is with regard to the difficulty of developing relationships with peers or teachers. This can be especially challenging in language classes, where building a rapport with classmates and instructors is crucial for learning and practising the language. Shy learners may feel isolated and disconnected from their peers and teachers, making the learning experience less enjoyable and ineffective. Unfortunately, some groups of learners tend to be at risk for developing fewer close relationships with teachers than typically developing children; such learners display high levels of shyness (Nurmi, 2012).

However, it is important to note that shyness is not an insurmountable obstacle for foreign language learners. Several strategies can be used to help shy learners overcome their fears and become more confident and engaged in their language studies. One approach is to provide learners with opportunities to practice speaking in a safe and supportive environment. This can include activities such as role-playing, pair work, and small group discussion (Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017; Rahimy & Safarpour, 2012). Teachers can also offer positive feedback and encouragement to learners, helping them to build self-esteem and confidence (Park & Lee, 2004). Another strategy is to provide opportunities for learners to engage with native speakers of English (Farooqui, 2007). This can include language exchange programmes, conversation partners, and immersion experiences. These opportunities can expose shy learners to authentic language use and allow them to practice real-life speaking skills.

Therefore, anxiety and shyness can be a significant obstacle for foreign language learners of English. However, with the right strategies and support, anxious and shy learners can overcome their fears and become more confident and engaged in their language studies. Further views on the strategies that could help eliminate or reduce negative affective factors, anxiety and shyness, are proposed by the participants and researchers of the current study in the final part of the study.

## Previous Studies

Learners may display physical symptoms like shaking, sweating, confusion, or an accelerated heartbeat (American Psychological Association, 2014). However, some researchers have shown that a small amount of anxiety aids learning. Most studies have demonstrated that anxiety has detrimental effects and that language anxiety is inversely related to acquisition. In other words, learning is expected to increase as anxiety decreases and vice versa (Islam, 2017).

Oxford English Dictionary (2015) defines shyness as "the feeling of humiliation or distress arising from the consciousness of something dishonorable or ridiculous in one's or another's behavior or circumstances or from a situation offensive to one's or another's sense of propriety or decency." Negative affective factors always have undesirable outcomes. They work as inhibitors to language learning among EFL Learners. Several problems are related to those negative affective factors, and much research has been conducted on the topic, and subsequently, the results were negative.

Kellar et al. (2013) provided evidence of how such factors influenced learning. They researched whether shyness makes it harder for immigrant preschoolers to learn a second language. They chose 330 bilingual immigrant preschoolers as a cross-sectional sample, and as a longitudinal sample, they chose 130 immigrant preschoolers. The researchers observed

the subjects and interviewed their parents to determine whether they were shy or not. They also tested how well they could speak a second language by looking at how well they understood words and sentences and how well they could write words and sentences. The study found that shy immigrant children had lower second language competence and slower language development than their non-shy counterparts.

León and Cely (2010) conducted an action research with 33 participants to motivate teens to develop their speaking abilities via games at public high schools in Colombia. Twelve pupils identified the goal of classroom activities as overcoming shyness. When asked, "What factors interfered with your speaking talent or made it difficult to talk during the English class?" Twenty-seven students reported shyness as the most challenging skill to master. In the same vein, Rahimy & Safarpour (2012) conducted an experimental study to investigate the impact of role-playing exercises on the development of speaking skills. As a result, they found out that role-play exercises influenced learners' abilities. The authors pointed out that students were unmotivated to engage and were too nervous and hesitant to speak in class. Therefore, role-playing helped them participate. Moosa et al. (2011) investigated the link between shyness and self-esteem in female ninth-graders. The study revealed that some students had periodic shyness, whilst others experienced acute shyness, which impeded students' skill development.

Park and Lee (2004) investigated the link between L2 learner's anxiety, self-confidence, and oral performance. The outcomes of the study revealed a significant association between anxiety and self-confidence and students' oral performance. That is to say, the more anxious learners are about speaking English, the worse their oral performance levels become (negative connection). On the contrary, the stronger their self-esteem is, the higher their oral performance score. Similarly, Mohtasham and Farnia (2017) conducted a correlational study to evaluate the association between anxiety and English-speaking skills among Iranian EFL students. The findings revealed that English learning anxiety had a substantial, moderate negative association with students' English-speaking scores.

Anwar et al. (2010) conducted a case study on anxiety in the foreign language classroom and its relationship to students' success. The findings revealed a negative relationship between language anxiety and success. The more worried the student, the lower his or her degree of achievement. Furthermore, their survey revealed that worrying about grammar errors, pronunciation, and the inability to speak spontaneously was identified as the most significant source of anxiety. Their research found that students speaking anxiety was induced by various variables, including fear of making mistakes, a lack of vocabulary, and poor pronunciation accuracy. Similarly, Bancroft's study (1996) revealed that students were unable to participate in English conversation owing to their lack of vocabulary, timidity, and fear of making mistakes, causing them to be unable to speak effectively in English. Therefore, the present study attempted to explore to what extent negative affective factors such as anxiety and shyness influence the learnability of EFL among Yemenis and find suitable solutions that would help learners avoid such factors and learn the language smoothly and successfully.

As the present study is concerned with negative affective factors, the researchers limited this study to anxiety and shyness. The students at the English Language Department, Faculty of Education, Thamar University face some affective factors that delay their learning of English and therefore hinder their performance subsequently. Hence, there is a need to investigate the affective factors that learners experience during their study and propose possible remedies that could help eliminate or reduce the negative effects of such factors.

### **Objectives**

This study aimed to identify the affective factors that negatively affect the process of foreign language learning. It also aimed to investigate how negative affective factors affect learning EFL and proposes possible remedies (solutions) that may eliminate or decrease the negative effects of affective factors.

## Research questions

This study attempted to address the following questions:

- 1- What are the affective factors that negatively affect learning EFL among Yemeni undergraduate learners at Tamar University?
- 2- What are the effects of those negative affective factors on learning EFL?
- 3- What are the possible remedies that can help eliminate or decrease the negative effects of affective factors?

## Method

### Participants

The sample of this study comprised 20 junior students enrolled in the English Language Department at the Faculty of Education, Tamar University in Yemen, during the academic year 2020–2021. They were classified into 11 females and nine males. They were invited for the interview sessions to determine the effects of negative affective factors on participants' learning of English. The researchers chose the purposive sampling technique to learn about the effects of shyness and anxiety on the performance of the study sample.

### Instrument

This research used the interview to collect data from the participants. Selecting the interview as an instrument for data collection in this study was inspired by Fontana & Frey (2000), who described the interview as "one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings" (p. 645). The interviews took place at the end of the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The participants were enrolled in an Applied Linguistics course taught by the first researcher. The course helped the participants understand their study-related problems.

### Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview was carried out to obtain information from the chosen sample to get answers to the research questions. The interview sessions were face-to-face, and all the participants' data were oral. One section was open for the participants to write their views. Upon completing all interviews, the researchers transferred all the recordings and texts to a Microsoft-word document for transcription, qualitative analysis, and discussion.

## Results

The outcomes of the present study are shown through the participants' responses to the given questions.

### Q.1. What are the affective factors that negatively affect Yemeni EFL undergraduate learners at Tamar University?

Of the total number of participants, most of them reported that anxiety and shyness as the chief negative affective factors that affect their foreign language learning. Below are some examples quoted from the sample's responses:

Participant 2: "Anxiety and shyness are the main factors that affect learning EFL."

Participant 4: "There are many factors that negatively affect learning EFL, such as negative attitude, lack of encouragement, shyness, and anxiety."

Participant 5: "There are internal and external affective factors that play a negative role in learning/acquiring a foreign language such as English language. Some of the

internal factors are motivation, shyness, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and lack of confidence."

Participant 19: "The affective factors are: shyness, fright, and bewilderment."

Based on the examples given above, anxiety and shyness are the most common factors that play a negative role in learning EFL among the studied sample.

### **Q2: What are the effects of those negative affective factors on learning EFL?**

According to the participants' responses, anxiety and shyness negatively affect the learning process. These factors play the role of inhibitors and can lead to failure. Below are some responses provided by the study sample.

Participant 4: "Anxiety is considered as one of the essential problems that obstruct the process of learning English. If learners feel anxious, they will be confused; and that really affects their mastery of the four language skills and their exam scores as well. Also, shyness is very common, especially among English language learners. It prevents learners from progressing in their abilities and skills in English learning. Of course, shyness works as an inhibition. The shier the learners, the less proficient in English learning they become. Those who feel shy will not learn English easily and will suffer a lot."

Participant 6: "Anxiety negatively affects the psychological factors which make students unable to get information about the language and may cause them to fail. Shyness is considered a negative factor in learning English because learners become incapable of showing their abilities and talents in learning the English language, such as the ability to communicate fluently or good listening and understanding of English conversations and so on."

Participant 10: "Anxiety in learning EFL has a negative role since it contributes negatively in many cases resulting in poor performance, forgetting ideas, and failure when mastering the language. From my point of view, anxiety and its intensity can negatively affect the process of learning English since it reduces the learners' production, even sometimes prevents the learners from achieving their whole cognition of the language, or maybe it increases the learner's anxiety from many aspects in acquiring language as a foreign language resulting in very poor academic goals for the language learning. Shyness is one of the worst factors that negatively affect the learning of EFL since it prevents the learners from getting and practicing their communicative skills, prohibits them from achieving the main goals of learning, and causes a lack of understanding of the language well. Shyness can negatively affect learning EFL. It also inhibits learning English since it increases the learner's anxiety about participating in the classes. Also, it prevents them from giving certain answers, or sometimes they become silent all the time even if they have it (because of fear of making mistakes), and this is because of their shyness. Thus, shyness results in less production in learning EFL."

### **Q3: What are the possible remedies that can help eliminate or decrease the negative effects of affective factors?**

Based on the data probed from the participants, there are various remedies that can help eliminate or decrease the negative effects of affective factors which negatively affect learning EFL.

Participant 5: "The only way of overcoming such negative affective factors can be achieved by the learners themselves. They should increase and enhance their self-confidence and try to practice whatever they learn. Also, they must develop their communicative skills and be well-prepared before the class to participate with no worries of making mistakes."

Participant 10: "The possible ways to overcome such negative effects can be achieved from two sides: the first one is by the learners themselves, and the second one is by the teachers as well as the environment. With regard to learners, they can overcome these negative effects by increasing their self-confidence, practicing their subjects of study and whatever they learn, preparing themselves well for all possible questions or presentations, and so on. As for teachers, they can help the learners overcome these negative effects by encouraging them to produce whatever they have even if they make mistakes, giving them very encouraging words to overcome their anxiety, and by creating a very helpful environment to lessen the learner's shyness with every possible way to achieve such goals."

Participant 14: "The best ways to overcome those factors are:

- Constant encouragement of English language practice for daily life tasks of the learners.
- Building self-confidence in the learners and their minds and educating them that everything is possible.
- Using teaching methods by the instructors, that are less stressed."

As shown above, many participants shared their perspectives on the possible remedies that could help in reducing learning anxiety and shyness based on the methods that can be appropriate for them. Most of their responses to the respective question included practice, building self-confidence, preparing themselves for any urgent activities, etc. However, researchers did not mention all participants' responses, but they added a number of possible solutions to decrease the negative effects of those factors that can be a real hindrance to learning EFL.

## Discussion

Based on the research objectives, questions, the review of the related studies, and the participants' responses, it can be deduced that English language learners encounter negative affective factors that affect their learning process and performance. According to the participants' responses to the first question, many affective factors negatively affect English learning as a foreign language. These elements include but are not limited to anxiety, inhibition, negative attitudes, introversion, lack of confidence, shyness, and fear. The study revealed that although these factors negatively affect the English language process, shyness and anxiety have the highest degree of effect on the learners' learning process. As shown in the participants' responses, most responses to the first question included anxiety and shyness.

Furthermore, some previous research on the topic under discussion has drawn attention to the effects of affective factors, and the results of their investigations showed that the effects are negative. Several researchers pointed out that such factors hinder English language learners' proficiency, skill mastering, and being proper and successful language learners. In a study carried out by Bancroft (1996), she found that students failed to join the English discussion because of their shyness, fear of making mistakes and lack of vocabulary resulting in their inability to speak English well. The results of Bancroft go in accord with the results of the present study and the previous research outcomes in which those studies showed that learners' anxiety and shyness negatively influence foreign language learning (English in particular). Such factors affect learners' performance, primarily presentations, speaking, reading, communication, and test outcomes. Moreover, most of the participants' responses on the role of anxiety in foreign language learning and how it negatively affects their learning process revealed that anxiety lessens the learners' ability to learn the language, makes them very worried about making mistakes, contributes to making them less competent learners, leads them to lose tests' scores and may lead to failure.

The findings of Al-Shbou et al. (2013) and Mohtasham & Farnia (2017) align with the present study's finding, in which their study revealed that the greater the learners' anxiety over speaking English, the lower their scores. Thus, it can be concluded that anxiety is an inhibiting factor that negatively affects learners' communication, test results, and performance, either oral or written. Additionally, it directly affects learners' psychological and physical health (which is the primary concern for all human beings).

Based on the previous findings and the results of the current study, shyness is another affective factor that negatively affects language learning. Responses showed that shyness prohibits their learning and makes them very shy and nervous when presenting orally. It makes them afraid of negative evaluation, causes them fear of being criticized, mocked, or laughed at by their peers, and makes them less communicative, anti-social, and less confident.

As is shown in the participant's responses in the present study, speaking in front of others is a complex task, which was supported by León and Cely (2010), in which nine students out of 27 of their participants stated shyness as the main factor that made speaking very difficult. Learners have a negative picture of themselves or others' evaluation that will affect their motivation to speak. Similarly, when students desire to speak a foreign language or are asked to respond to a question in a foreign language. Shy students may hesitate, pause, offer brief responses, forget most vocabulary, or skip the situation. As a result, people frequently overlook the implications of performance and discussions in speaking lessons because there is a wrong evaluation from the teachers that they are incapable of speaking skills.

Similarly, Keller et al. (2013) found that lesser competency is associated with slower language progress in shy learners. Learners in English classrooms have a variety of personality traits, including uninspired, outgoing, introverted, extroverted, and shy. In EFL classrooms, based on communication and discussion purposes, learners need to use the English language as a means of communication, participation, and discussion; however, shy learners are always in bad states.

Furthermore, when learners are asked to participate, according to the participants' responses, they gain more vocabulary resulting in irregular performance. Baldwin (2011) further clarifies that "speaking in front of people is one of the most common phobias that learners encounter and feeling of shyness makes their mind go blank or that they will forget what to say." Moosa et al. (2011) showed that some students exhibited occasional shyness while others experienced excessive shyness, which impeded their growth and talents. Thus, shyness and anxiety are two negative affective factors in the EFL learning process that lessens or hinders learning.

## Recommendations

The participants (in the interview responses) and researchers in this study tried to present some possible remedies that would help overcome or decrease the negative effects of anxiety and shyness when learning EFL. The participants' recommendations included increasing confidence and valuing English language learning, i.e., learners should develop a positive attitude towards learning EFL. Besides, teachers are recommended to offer collaborative group tasks, and learners should practice the language more and more. The participants also proposed to improve learners' competence prior to performance, teachers' guidance, and encouragement to overcome the fear of being mistaken, mocked, or criticized. Alongside these recommendations, teachers should establish a welcoming and open classroom environment. By doing so, anxious and shy learners are meant to feel more comfortable making errors while learning.

Consequently, students will no longer be concerned about their poor pronunciation and grammar. Helping learners be more confident in their learning by educating them to look upon shyness and anxiety as things to overcome and not to fear. Being social is one of the significant features of successful learners. Learners need to realize the causes of anxiety



and shyness and try to overcome or stop those causes. Having extra activities next to learning English, such as role-plays, journeys, competitions (best speakers, for example), and the like, would generate better language learners.

In order to establish a relaxed environment in classrooms that teachers observe, it is essential to let students participate more in oral activities, give them positive feedback, and motivate them. These strategies can help students feel less anxious, more confident, and motivated to study. Teachers should accept different responses. The students will feel more comfortable engaging in-class activities and responding to the teacher's inquiries. Learners should study well and be well-prepared for activities and tests.

### Conclusion

Based on the present study's findings and previous studies, anxiety and shyness are the negative affective factors that have the highest detrimental effects on English language learners' ability to learn EFL effectively. Foreign language anxiety and shyness adversely affect the learning process in general and speaking performance in particular among English language learners. In this case, the primary concerns of foreign language learning and learners are communication anxiety, exam anxiety, and fear of being subject to mockery. The study's findings showed that the students become shy and anxious when speaking English in front of others and when having tests. However, the case could be different concerning the emerging learning modes such as online and virtual learning in which learners may learn a foreign language without coming across negative affective factors such as anxiety and shyness and learn at ease. Based on the views of the participants in the present study and literature, the reasons towards having these two affective factors were connected to learners' lack of proper pronunciation, weak background in grammatical structure and vocabulary, lack of fluency in written English, insufficient time to prepare well for activities and tests, the less mastery of the assigned materials in their course of study, and the little use of English in their daily life. Learners, instructors, and parents should work together to overcome or reduce those factors' effects on English language learning among learners by building learners' confidence, developing their positive attitudes towards learning the language, involving them in collaborative group tasks and discussions, providing them with the appropriate guidance and encouragement, and educating them about the importance of being well-prepared for class topics and activities. Though the results of the present study are limited to Yemeni EFL learners at the Faculty of Education, Tamar University, the results are of help for other language learners, teachers, and researchers in the field of EFL learning in which they could have a better understanding of some hindering factors to EFL learning such as anxiety and shyness and the possible remedies to overcome such factors. Further research on the topic is encouraged to be carried out in other Yemeni and non-Yemeni universities and schools.

#### Disclosure Statement:

We (the authors of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. Thus, we take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

#### Ethics Statement

We confirm that the manuscript has been created by the authors and not an AI tool/Large Language Model (LLM). We are fully responsible for the content of the manuscript and are thus liable for any breach of publication ethics.

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