



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mitigating Language Learning Anxiety: The Mediating Roles of Autonomous Learning and Academic Resilience in Enhancing ESL Students' Academic Performance

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates how English Language Learning Anxiety (ELLA) affects students' academic performance in English and examines the mediating roles of autonomous learning and academic resilience. Drawing on Foreign Language Anxiety Theory and Self-Determination Theory, a quantitative survey was conducted with 384 university students enrolled in English courses in Jinan, Shandong Province, China. Data were collected using validated instruments: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). Results from correlation and regression analyses revealed that ELLA negatively correlates with academic performance, while autonomous learning and resilience are positive predictors. Mediation analysis further showed that both autonomous learning and resilience significantly mediate the impact of ELLA on academic performance. These findings underscore the importance of promoting learner autonomy and psychological resilience in English language learning contexts. Implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English language proficiency has become a critical factor in academic success and career readiness, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries. However, acquiring English as a second language often evokes substantial anxiety among students, referred to as English Language Learning Anxiety (ELLA). Such anxiety can undermine students' cognitive processing, reduce participation, and ultimately impair academic performance.

Emerging evidence suggests that the detrimental effects of ELLA can be mitigated through internal learner characteristics such as autonomous learning and academic resilience. Autonomous learners, who take initiative and responsibility for their own learning, often report lower anxiety levels and better academic outcomes. Similarly, resilient students are more likely to cope effectively with academic stress and persist in their learning goals despite difficulties.

Although many studies have explored the direct effects of anxiety on academic outcomes, fewer have examined how learner autonomy and resilience mediate this relationship, especially in the context of ESL learners in Asia. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating: (i) the relationship between ELLA and academic performance; (ii) the predictive roles of autonomous learning and academic resilience; and (iii) the mediating effects of these two variables.

Research Questions

What is the relationship between English Language Learning Anxiety and students' academic performance?

How do autonomous learning and academic resilience influence academic performance in English?

Do autonomous learning and academic resilience mediate the relationship between ELLA and academic performance?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to both theoretical and applied knowledge by integrating constructs from educational psychology into the study of language learning. Findings can inform teaching practices and institutional policies aimed at enhancing ESL learners' performance through psychological and pedagogical interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) as a distinct form of situation-specific anxiety experienced during the process of learning a foreign language. FLA includes three key components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These aspects can negatively impact learners' confidence, participation, and performance in language-related tasks.

Research has shown that higher levels of FLA are associated with lower language proficiency and academic achievement (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Learners with elevated FLA may avoid classroom interaction, hesitate to speak, or underperform in assessments due to cognitive interference caused by stress.

Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning refers to the capacity of learners to take charge of their own learning process, including setting goals, selecting strategies, and self-evaluating progress (Holec, 1981). In language learning, autonomy fosters motivation, persistence, and effective self-regulation.

According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), autonomy is one of the basic psychological needs essential for intrinsic motivation. Students who perceive themselves as autonomous learners are more likely to engage actively in language learning and demonstrate better academic performance.

Studies indicate that autonomy not only enhances academic achievement but also serves as a buffer against the negative effects of anxiety. Learners who can regulate their learning experiences are less dependent on external factors, leading to greater confidence and reduced anxiety (Little, 1995).

Academic Resilience

Academic resilience is defined as a student's ability to effectively deal with academic challenges, setbacks, and pressure. It encompasses adaptive coping, perseverance, and emotional regulation in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001).

In language learning, resilience enables students to manage stress, maintain motivation, and recover from failures such as poor test performance or classroom embarrassment. Resilient students are more likely to adopt positive coping strategies and remain committed to learning despite anxiety-provoking situations.

Empirical studies support the role of resilience in moderating the relationship between anxiety and performance. Students with high resilience show better academic outcomes even in high-stress environments (Dewaele, 2013).

Mediating Roles of Autonomy and Resilience

Few studies have simultaneously examined the mediating roles of both autonomous learning and academic resilience in the relationship between ELLA and academic performance. Theoretical models suggest that both constructs may independently and jointly reduce the negative impact of anxiety.

Autonomous learners may experience less anxiety because they feel more in control, while resilient learners can better cope with stress when it occurs. When present together, these traits may significantly reduce the detrimental effects of ELLA.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a mediation model where ELLA predicts academic performance, and this relationship is mediated by autonomous learning and academic resilience. This framework is grounded in Foreign Language Anxiety Theory and Self-Determination Theory and aims to provide a holistic view of how psychological factors influence ESL learners' academic outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationships between English Language Learning Anxiety (ELLA), academic performance, autonomous learning, and academic resilience. The design allowed for testing direct and indirect effects, particularly the mediating roles of autonomy and resilience, through statistical analysis of survey data.

Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised university students enrolled in English language courses in Jinan, Shandong Province, China. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure diversity in academic level and institutional type (regular undergraduate, vocational undergraduate, and vocational college students). A total of 384 valid responses were collected and analyzed, which aligns with statistical recommendations for medium effect sizes in structural models.

Instruments

Three validated instruments were used in this study:

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986): Measures ELLA across dimensions such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) (Fisher et al., 2001): Assesses learners' readiness for autonomous learning, including goal-setting, self-monitoring, and strategy use.

Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) (Connor & Davidson, 2003): Evaluates students' psychological resilience in the face of stress and setbacks.

Academic Performance: Assessed via self-reported English grades and proficiency scores in speaking, reading, listening, and writing, adapted from Eslit & Michael (2023).

All instruments were translated (where necessary), pilot-tested, and reviewed for cultural relevance. Cronbach's alpha values for all scales exceeded 0.80, indicating high internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through online and paper-based questionnaires administered with the support of university instructors. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 27. Descriptive statistics described the sample characteristics and variable distributions. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to assess bivariate relationships. Multiple regression and mediation analyses were performed to test the research hypotheses. The PROCESS macro (Model 4) was used for mediation testing, with bootstrapping (500 samples) employed to determine the significance of indirect effects.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee at the respective university. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time.

RESULT

Descriptive Statistics

Participants included 213 females (55.5%) and 171 males (44.5%), with an average age of 20.6 years ($SD = 1.84$). The mean scores for the key variables were as follows: ELLA ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.58$), Autonomous Learning ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.66$), Academic Resilience ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.61$), and Academic Performance ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.54$).

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlations revealed significant relationships among the variables. ELLA was negatively correlated with academic performance ($r = -0.45$, $p < .001$), autonomous learning ($r = -0.41$, $p < .001$), and resilience ($r = -0.38$, $p < .001$). Both autonomous learning and resilience were positively correlated with academic performance ($r = 0.47$ and $r = 0.44$, respectively; $p < .001$).

Regression and Mediation Analysis

Multiple regression analyses confirmed that ELLA significantly predicted academic performance ($\beta = -0.43$, $p < .001$). When autonomous learning and resilience were included as mediators, the direct effect of ELLA on academic performance was reduced ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < .01$), indicating partial mediation.

Bootstrapped mediation analysis using PROCESS (Model 4) demonstrated significant indirect effects for both mediators:

Autonomous learning (indirect effect = -0.12 ; 95% CI $[-0.18, -0.07]$)

Resilience (indirect effect = -0.10 ; 95% CI $[-0.15, -0.06]$)

These results support the hypothesis that both autonomous learning and academic resilience mediate the relationship between language anxiety and academic performance.

DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical support for the hypothesis that English Language Learning Anxiety (ELLA) negatively impacts students' academic performance, and that this relationship is significantly mediated by autonomous learning and academic resilience. These findings extend previous research by examining the joint mediating effects of both psychological constructs in the same model.

The negative association between ELLA and academic performance aligns with past studies suggesting that anxiety can impair concentration, participation, and memory recall, all of which are essential to language learning. High levels of anxiety may lead to avoidance behaviors and reduce the opportunities for practice, thus lowering achievement in English language courses.

Autonomous learning was found to mediate the anxiety-performance relationship, which is consistent with Self-Determination Theory. Students with higher levels of autonomy are more likely to engage in self-regulation, goal-setting, and strategy use, which can buffer the cognitive and emotional impact of anxiety. This suggests that encouraging students to take ownership of their learning may reduce their dependency on teacher-led instruction and promote academic success.

Similarly, academic resilience plays a key mediating role, indicating that students who can persevere through setbacks and manage stress are better able to maintain academic performance despite the presence of anxiety. This aligns with resilience theory, emphasizing adaptive coping and emotional regulation as mechanisms for overcoming learning challenges.

The partial mediation observed indicates that while autonomous learning and resilience significantly reduce the negative effects of anxiety, ELLA still exerts a direct detrimental influence on performance. This finding highlights the need for comprehensive interventions that not only build learner autonomy and resilience but also directly target the sources of anxiety, such as fear of negative evaluation and test apprehension.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes valuable insights into the psychological dynamics of English language learning. It confirms that English Language Learning Anxiety (ELLA) impairs academic performance and that both autonomous learning and academic resilience can mediate and lessen this negative

effect. These findings underscore the importance of addressing both emotional and cognitive aspects of the language learning process.

Implications for Educators: Language instructors should incorporate strategies that promote self-directed learning and provide resilience training. This can include metacognitive training, self-assessment tools, goal-setting workshops, and resilience-building exercises. A more student-centered, psychologically supportive classroom environment can empower learners and improve outcomes.

Implications for Curriculum Designers: English language programs should embed autonomy-promoting elements into the curriculum. This includes providing opportunities for learner choice, independent learning modules, and reflection activities. Integrating resilience-focused interventions, such as stress management and emotional regulation workshops, may also yield long-term benefits.

Implications for Policymakers: Educational policies should recognize the role of learner psychology in academic performance. Funding for mental health resources, training for language teachers in psychological skills, and policies that support inclusive, low-anxiety environments can help bridge the gap between academic demands and emotional well-being.

Limitations and Future Directions: This study used self-report data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. The sample was also geographically limited to universities in Jinan, China. Future research should include longitudinal designs, multi-source data collection, and cross-cultural comparisons to validate and extend the present findings.

In conclusion, fostering learner autonomy and resilience is a promising avenue to mitigate the adverse effects of ELLA and enhance ESL students' academic performance. Such efforts are vital to ensuring equitable and effective language education in an increasingly globalized world.

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