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## Research Paper

# Impact of Positive Psychology-Based Instruction on EFL Learners' Perceived Use of Anxiety Reducing Strategies

Alireza Bekhrad<sup>1</sup>, Behdokht Mall-Amiri<sup>2\*</sup>, Nasim Shangarffam<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English Language, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

[alireza004616@gmail.com](mailto:alireza004616@gmail.com)

<sup>2\*</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

[beh.malamiri@iau.ac.ir](mailto:beh.malamiri@iau.ac.ir)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

[nshangarf@yahoo.com](mailto:nshangarf@yahoo.com)

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## Abstract

This study intended to unveil the impact of incorporation of positive psychology theory into English instructions on the preference for anxiety-reducing strategies among Iranian EFL learners. The participants consisted of 60 EFL learners, from Safir Institute, Tehran, Iran, at the intermediate level, who were selected out of 90 EFL learners selected on convenience sampling basis. The 60 learners selected on the basis of their scores from an Oxford Placement Test (OPT), given to the 90 learners, were split into two equal 30-member groups. Both groups were given the language anxiety reducing strategies (LARS) questionnaire as pretest. Then, positive psychology-based instructions were provided to the experimental group drawing on five types of positive psychology-based instruction techniques for 20 sessions. These five instruction techniques included gratitude, optimistic intervention, positive affirmations, savouring, and strength-building measures. The control group received no intervention concerning positive psychology, and learners followed the conventional syllabus of the language school. After the treatment, the two groups took the LARS questionnaire as post-test. The results of ANCOVA indicated that teaching positive psychology techniques significantly increased anxiety-reducing strategies preference among Iranian EFL learners.

**Keywords:** Anxiety reducing strategies, Foreign language learning anxiety, Positive psychology

تأثیر آموزش مبتنی بر روانشناسی مثبت بر استفاده درک شده زبان آموزان زبان انگلیسی از راهبردهای کاهش اضطراب این مطالعه با هدف آشکارسازی تأثیر گنجاندن نظریه روانشناسی مثبت‌نگر در دستورالعمل‌های انگلیسی بر ترجیح راهبردهای کاهش اضطراب در زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی انجام شد. شرکت کنندگان شامل 60 زبان آموز زبان انگلیسی از مؤسسه سفیر، تهران، ایران، در سطح متوسط بودند که از بین 90 زبان آموز زبان انگلیسی به صورت نمونه‌گیری در دسترس انتخاب شدند. 60 یادگیرنده بر اساس نمرات خود از آزمون تعیین سطح آکسفورد (OPT) که به 90 یادگیرنده داده شد، انتخاب شدند، به دو گروه 30 نفره مساوی تقسیم شدند. به هر دو گروه پرسشنامه راهبردهای کاهش اضطراب زبان (LARS) به عنوان پیش آزمون داده شد. سپس دستورالعمل‌های مبتنی بر روانشناسی مثبت‌نگر با استفاده از پنج نوع تکنیک آموزش مبتنی بر روانشناسی مثبت‌نگر به مدت 20 جلسه به گروه آزمایش ارائه شد. این پنج تکنیک آموزشی شامل قنردانی، مداخله خوش بینانه، تاکیدات مثبت، مزه کردن، و اقدامات تقویتی بود. گروه کنترل هیچ مداخله‌ای در مورد روانشناسی مثبت دریافت نکردند و زبان آموزان برنامه درسی مرسوم مدرسه زبان را دنبال کردند. پس از درمان، دو گروه پرسشنامه LARS را به عنوان پس آزمون گرفتند. نتایج ANCOVA نشان داد که آموزش تکنیک‌های روانشناسی مثبت‌نگر به‌طور معناداری ترجیح راهبردهای کاهش اضطراب را در بین زبان‌آموزان ایرانی افزایش می‌دهد.

**کلیدواژگان:** راهبردهای کاهش اضطراب، اضطراب یادگیری زبان خارجی، روانشناسی مثبت‌گرا

## Introduction

Anxiety is viewed as one of the most debilitating factors in the process of language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). As Can (2019) maintained, Foreign Language Learning (FLL) as a highly challenging task is interwoven with both cognitive and affective variables. One of the affective variables which can negatively affect FLL is anxiety (Li & Wei, 2023). Historically, language educators and researchers' focus has been drawn to the notion of foreign language anxiety. Literature review uncovers that some researchers believe that anxiety coming from foreign language is likely to bring about feelings of fear, apprehension, tension, and nervousness (Arnold & Brown, 1999), which can negatively impact learners' performance (Alamer et al., 2023).

A review of previous investigations (e.g., Na, 2007; Trang et al., 2013) reveals that EFL learners feel anxious abundantly during the language learning process. Trang et al. (2013) explored to what extent foreign language instructors and students were cognizant of the existence of foreign language anxiety (FLA) and their attitudes towards it. The results revealed that two-thirds of the learners experience foreign language anxiety and the teachers failed to pay enough attention to it. Na's (2007) investigation showed that EFL learners experienced a great anxiety in learning English. Because anxiety exists in the process of language learning, researchers and teachers should find ways which can help reduce anxiety. One of the possible approaches which may reduce language learning anxiety is the implementation of positive psychology (PP).

The results of previous investigations (e.g., Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Weiss et al., 2016) have revealed that positive psychology can significantly improve wellbeing, and help decreasing negative states such as depressive symptoms, negative thoughts, and anxiety over time. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted, positive psychology is a field of investigation that attempts to augment the role of good feelings, personality strengths, and positive institutions bringing about human welfare and happiness. Duckworth et al. (2005) maintained that the roots of positive psychology are traced to humanistic psychology. Stemming from humanistic psychology, specific theories related to positive psychology have arisen (Fredrickson, 2001). The developed theories of humanistic psychology have given birth to new models for human flourishing (Seligman, 2011), innovative viewpoints on sympathy and thankfulness (Emmons & Shelton, 2002), and models related to personality merits and powers (Seligman, 2011).

As Lazarus and Folkman (1984) noted, "coping comprises the cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals use to manage stressful situations" (p. 32). However, "the question of what students are actually doing to cope with their anxiety in language classrooms has received hardly any attention" (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004, p. 259). Foreign language learning is likely to be stressful for language learners, which can consequently lead to anxiety. Thus, learners need a capability to tackle their stress during the language learning process (Kao et al., 2017).

An evaluation of the previous research on positive psychology-based instructions in Iran (e. g., Abdeyan et al., 2018; Narafshan & Noori, 2018; Sorbi et al., 2018; Tagalidou et al., 2019) and the international contexts (e. g., Lambert et al., 2019, Kubiak et al., 2019, Hendriks et al., 2019, Yazdani & Aghaei, 2019, Hunter et al., 2019, Filep & Laing, 2019, McDermott et al., 2019, Smith & Worth, 2019, Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2019, Macharis & Kerret, 2019) shows that, no study, to date, has attempted to explore if teaching positive psychology techniques has any significant effect on the use of and preference for anxiety-reducing strategies among EFL learners. Thus, the current investigation was an attempt to address this gap. This study bears importance as it incorporates teaching techniques to reduce learners' anxiety and sheds light on implementation aspects of positive psychology to that end. Therefore, the raised question in the present study was as follows:

**Research Question:** Does teaching positive psychology techniques have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' perceived use of anxiety-reducing strategies?



## Literature Review

### Positive Psychology

“Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). As Peterson (2006) noted, positive psychology refers to “the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between” (p. 4). It has to do with the empirical investigation of the way in which “normal” individuals lead their life with the aim of assisting them to progress and flourish (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2011; Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Authors within the context of PP confirm the existence of problems, stressing the reinforcement of “positive” notions including dynamism, hope, bravery, welfare, hopefulness, innovativeness, prosperity, flourishing, resilience, constructive feelings, life wishes, emotional ingenuity, powers, common sense, laughter (Lopez & Snyder, 2009). According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), PP research is based on positive subjective experience, and positive individual characters.

As Seligman (2011) noted, the focal purpose of positive psychology is construed to be the welfare of individuals. As Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) maintained, well-being, to some extent, can be manipulated especially via engaging in activities which are goal oriented and focus the individuals’ attention on positive processes, emotions and thoughts. Such activities are referred to as Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs). As Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) maintained, PPIs refer to determined activities aimed at upsurging the occurrence of positive feelings and consequently the associated experiences. Such activities would ease the utilization of activities and feelings which finally entail flourishing (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). PPIs have so far been effectively employed in institutions (Mills et al., 2013), healthcare (Kahler et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2015) and medical contexts (Huffman et al., 2014). They are easy to deliver and cost effective for organizations and educational contexts (Hendriks et al., 2019). Moreover, they are non-stigmatizing (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) which make them appropriate when it comes to issues such as anxiety.

Positive psychology has the potentiality of becoming an area in second language acquisition. “The field focuses on positive emotion, positive character traits, and institutions that enable individuals to flourish, all of which are major concerns in language learning” (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 3). The review of literature shows that positive psychology has been expanding in SLA, with increasing the well-being and students' language leaning success as its main aim (Jiang & Li, 2017; Strzałka, 2016; Szymczak, 2016;). For the first time, Lake (2013) introduced the relevance of PP to the SLA (Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014). Following the first exploration connecting PP to SLA, the Special Issue on “PP in SLA” (2014) indicated signs of the growth of the PP application in SLA. Two well-known anthologies edited by MacIntyre (2016) yielded different topics and arduous research designs in the PP movement (Al-Hoorie, 2017). Under the influence of Seligman’s well-being theory (2011), PP has mainly been mischaracterized as a new way to delete barriers and difficulties as it is exclusively related to positive emotions (Komorowska, 2016).

### Anxiety in Language Learning

Foreign Language Learning (FLL) as a highly challenging task is interwoven with many variables including the cognitive and affective ones (Can, 2019). One of the affective variables in the context of FLL is language learning anxiety (LLA). Spielberg (1983) refers to anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry” (p. 125). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined LLA as a “distinctive complex of self- perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). When an individual embarks on learning a second language, he/she

goes through a highly unstable psychological states since it directly threatens his/her self-perception and world-view (Yang & Quadir, 2018). L2 anxiety can emanate from the contribution of the sole or a combination of different factors (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Consequently, it is of enormous importance to take into account language anxiety due to its profound contribution to learners' perception of learning an L2 as well as to their motivation to keep on studying a language through the advanced levels (Phillips, 1992).

As Young (1991) noted, given the nature of academic study which puts emphasis on individual achievement as well as high marks, the learners' participation in class activities may result in feelings of anxiety in some learners. Moreover, how the contact between the instructor and the L2 students unfolds in the classroom may have a huge impact on the intensity of anxiety. For instance, error correction involves important interactions between teacher and learners. As the results of Young's (1991) study showed, learners were worried about how others viewed their mistakes. Teachers' over-attention to the learners' errors and constant correction appeared to make learners believe that they were foolish. Some activities in L2 classes which are commonly done result in experiencing language anxiety by the students. There is a general acceptance that L2 anxiety is mainly due to having to speak in the L2 before a group. Koch and Terrell (as cited in Young, 1991) concluded that the majority of the learners in their investigation believed that oral presentations and oral tasks were the most anxiety-inducing practices in L2 classrooms.

According to Young (1991), learners also report anxiety when they have devoted many hours to studying for a test only to find that the test uses unknown or vague material or question formats with which they have had no experience. Park and Lee (2005) explored how L2 learners' anxiety and self-confidence are related to speaking ability. The findings revealed negative correlation between learners' scores on oral performance and their anxiety level. Tanveer (2007) examined the reasons of language anxiety felt by 20 language learners. This study also explores the role of anxiety in communication in the L2, showing findings similar to those found by Park and Lee (2005). The results of Tanveer's (2007) investigation revealed that learners' stress, nervousness or anxiety may slow down their L2 learning and performance.

Although anxiety is construed as a destructive factor in foreign language learning, some researchers have argued that a little of anxiety may improve foreign language learning (Alsowat, 2016). Yet, as Young (1991) maintained, some studies (e.g., Backman, 1976; Brewster, 1975) have found no connection between anxiety and language learning. Therefore, an evaluation of the previous studies displays that the go-togetherness of anxiety and foreign language learning is characterized as a complex relation and the results of the previous research (e.g., Alsowat, 2016; Arnold & Brown, 1999; Backman, 1976; Brewster, 1975) concerning the relationship between language learning and anxiety are contradictory.

### **Anxiety Reducing Strategies**

Attempting to unravel the strategies EFL learners use to surmount their anxiety, Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004, p. 258) put forward five such strategies including "preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation". Young (1992) managed to determine sixteen strategies used to overcome their foreign language learning anxiety (FLLA), some of which are encouraging learners to do pair or group works avoiding pushing learners to speak when they are not ready, and avoiding putting the individual learners in spotlight in the class. The results of the investigation carried out by Kondo and Yang (2004) revealed seventy tactics for coping with L2 anxiety. This study was conducted on 219 EFL students in Japan, with the participants being divided into five strategies: "1-preparation, 2-relaxation, 3-positive thinking, 4-peer thinking, and 5-resignation (i.e., learners do not take any action to decrease their FLA, e.g., giving up, sleeping in class" (Kondo & Yang, 2004, p.262). Lukitasari (2008) carried out an investigation to shed

light on the strategies adopted by learners to tackle speaking problems in speaking class. The findings suggested that these learners encountered some speaking challenges such as shyness, having nothing to say, no participation, and use of L1. The study also indicated that the learners' speaking performance was poor due to their lack of mastery over 3 constituents of speaking, i.e., vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) have described interventions to decrease L2 speaking anxiety. For example, they put forth interventions including project work, as well as forming an ambient atmosphere in the classroom. They believe that incorporation of project work in instruction and the foreign language learning process provide the anxious and non-anxious students with identical chances to use the L2 in a friendly atmosphere. Therefore, through building a positive atmosphere (where errors are not blamed and deemed a part of a foreign language learning process), interventions can aid FL learners to diminish their dread of negative evaluation.

As the review of previous research shows, no investigation has thus far explored if teaching positive psychology techniques has any significant effect on the adoption of anxiety-reducing tactics among Iranian EFL learners. Thus, the current study, utilizing MacIntyre's (2016) perspective that positive psychology "focuses on positive emotion, positive character traits, and institutions that enable individuals to flourish, all of which are major concerns in language learning" (p.3) as the guiding conceptual framework, was an attempt to address this gap in the literature by examining if instructions based on positive psychology can significantly change EFL learners' preference for anxiety reducing strategies. This investigation was further inspired by Sin and Lyubomirsky's (2009) standpoint that positive psychology-based activities help to ease the use of activities and feelings which finally give rise to flourishing. The actions may be endeavours and tactics adopted by students to hinder the debilitating effects of anxiety, following Krashen's (1985) belief in the detrimental role of anxiety in learning a language, and MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) finding that language learners with anxiety can hardly express their views and underestimate their potentials. So, employing the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, the researchers attempted to explore if implementation of positive psychology-based instruction could lead to EFL learners' flourishing through empowering them with strategies to reduce their language learning anxiety.

## Method

### Participants

Sixty learners, at intermediate level of proficiency, selected out of an initial number of 90 learners, took part in this study. The 90 EFL learners at Safir language institute in Tehran took an Oxford Placement Test, and those who scored between 28 to 36 (Intermediate) were selected. Learners were within between 18 and 35 years old and included both genders. Moreover, 30 learners at the intermediate level, with similar characteristics to the main participants were non-randomly selected to pilot the OPT on. It should be noted that the selected learners stayed in their own classes as it was not feasible to assign them randomly to two separate groups for the objectives of this research because of the practical constraints set by the language institute. Thus, 30 of the learners at the intermediate level in 6 classes were randomly assigned as the experimental group. In a similar manner, 30 learners were assigned as the control group in 6 other classes.

### Instruments

#### Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

To select 60 learners from 90 for the aims of the research and to guarantee the learners' homogeneity regarding English language proficiency, an OPT was administered to the learners.

Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Edwards, 2009), consists of 60 items which assesses learners' language performance in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Test takers' scores displayed their level of language proficiency: Beginner (1-17), Elementary (18-27), Intermediate (28-36), Upper-intermediate (37-47), Advanced (48-55), high advanced (56-60). Those students who obtained scores from 28 to 36 were picked to take part in this study. As reliability depends on the sample, the test was initially tried on 30 learners with similar features to the participants for this quasi-experimental study, and Cronbach's Alpha estimation revealed that the test had a reliability index of .81, which is desirable.

### **Learners' Anxiety Reducing Strategies (LARS) Questionnaire**

The LARS scale utilised in this research was developed by Bekhrad et al. (in press). The developed questionnaire sought to figure out the components of the construct of anxiety reducing strategies adopted by EFL learners. The questionnaire has 13 items under three factors of anxiety reducing strategies (Metacognitive, Social, Tactile). The formed items are provided with 5 Likert-type alternatives: Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly disagree having values 5 to 1 respectively. As such, the maximum overall score obtainable from this questionnaire is 65 and the minimum is 13 with the higher score indicating higher preference for applying the strategies, connected to the causes of anxiety, to reduce LLA. Questions 1 to 5 are related to metacognitive strategies, items 6 to 9 correspond to the social component, and items 10 to 13 were akin to the tactile aspect (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was shown to have acceptable validity and reliability index of 0.969 for two of the factors and 0.892 for one factor.

### **Materials**

#### **Course book**

'Touchstone' authored by McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford (2014) was the course book used for instruction in the present study. The book has been written based on research into the Cambridge English Corpus. Moreover, Touchstone presents natural language in authentic contexts, and overtly improves learners' conversation strategies to speak fluently and confidently. The course book has 12 units, and three units were covered during the course of the present study. Each unit contains instructional materials to teach reading, listening, speaking, and writing as well as the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Each unit also has a review section in which all the unit content is practiced through further exercises.

#### **Procedure**

To ensure that a homogeneous sample of learners in terms of language proficiency was selected, the initial 90 learners were given a piloted OPT and only those learners whose scores were between 28 and 36 were included in the study. Sixty learners, who gained scores within the intended range were considered as the participants. Based on random assignment, thirty of these learners were put in the experimental group receiving positive psychology techniques, and the other 30 learners were put in the control group. Initially, the two groups were given the LARS questionnaire as pre-test to ensure homogeneity of the two groups at the outset.

Following that, the instructor introduced the concept of positive psychology to the learners in the experimental group in one session. Then, five types of positive psychology-based instruction techniques were practiced during 20 sessions. Such PP-based instruction techniques included gratitude, optimistic intervention, positive affirmations, savoring, and strength-building measures, which were applied in line with Parks et al. (2013), Schueller, Parks, and Tasimi (2013, cited in Chowdhury, 2020), King (2001, as cited in Chowdhury, 2020), Peterson, 2006, cited in Chowdhury, 2020) and Parks and Biswas-Diener (2013, cited in cited in Chowdhury,



2020). Each PP technique was practiced in 4 separate sessions. To practice such interventions, the components were modified to suit an English language instruction environment. The modifications made to the original interventions along with the intervention types were as follows.

**Gratitude** is one type of positive psychology intervention which was practiced in line with Parks et al. (2013). As Parks et al. (2013) maintained, growing gratitude through focusing on good things throughout the day has obtained sizeable attention as a rapid, simple, and easily circulated positive intervention. According to Parks et. al. (2013), gratitude interpolations were classified in two types of practice:

### **Self-reflective practices**

one instance is writing a gratitude journal that we keep and use as a self-expression tool. For self-reflective practices, the participants were required to create a journal in which they noted down five good things, events or people they felt thankful for every day. Learners were asked to write their notes either in English or Persian to avoid the possible language barriers in expressing themselves. Those who opted to write in Persian were helped by the teacher to translate their notes into English. To encourage more reflection, they were also asked to write a short note on why they feel thankful towards those things, events or people. Every session, learners were asked to compare their notes in pairs and/or groups. Moreover, for one session learners were asked about how they felt towards this type of treatment and discussed their attitudes towards this treatment type in pairs and groups. More specifically they were asked if keeping a journal and noting down the things, good events and people they felt thankful for made them feel any different emotionally,

**Interactive methods**, where we show our thankfulness to other people by saying ‘thank you,’ giving small signs or paying visits as tokens of appreciation. As for this method, learners were asked to actively express their gratitude to others whom they have noted in their journals. Moreover, learners were also encouraged to express their gratitude or positive emotions by writing thank you notes to themselves for noticing those good events every day. Whenever possible, learners were encouraged to write notes of appreciation to those whom they felt thankful for. Learners were asked to bring their notes to class and discuss the content of their notes in pairs and/or groups.

**Optimistic thinking** was used as the second technique of positive psychology. Optimistic intervention can create positive outcomes via setting realistic goals and expectations. The "Imagine Yourself" technique was practiced by asking the participants to note down where they saw themselves in the future with regard to their expectations (King, 2001). Alterations were made to such intervention to make it appropriate for an English instruction context as follows:

Three reading texts, downloaded from the internet on the basic tenets of optimistic thinking and benefits of such thinking, were given to the learners. Moreover, one text about the importance of goal setting in language learning was given to the learners to read. The texts were followed by comprehension and discussion questions. Then, the learners were asked to set language learning goals for themselves for different language skills and components. Learners were asked to write a paragraph explaining the goals they have set for each language skill and component and how they intended to achieve them. Then they were required to discuss their goals and ideas and share them with other students.

**Positive affirmation** was the third component which was practiced in the current research. To practice positive affirmations in the classroom, students were encouraged to state a positive statement about their ability and aspiration to learn the language skill that they were to be involved in. They were expected to do this activity regularly before each and every language skill-related task and exercise. The followings were some positive statements for example:

I am very positive in learning English and believe that I am a very successful learner.

I am confident about expressing myself in English and holding a five-minute fluent conversation about what I do.

My pronunciation is already very good, and I feel confident about my ability to learn how to improve my pronunciation.

I've made good progress in learning and retaining vocabulary. I feel confident and strongly believe in my ability to use vocabulary effectively.

To further apply this technique, students were instructed and encouraged to use positive affirmations and compliments as feedback to their classmates' activities. For instance, after reading texts, they were expected to provide positive feedback to each other's responses to comprehension questions, or writing tasks, along with the possible corrections. This was also provided by the teacher to the students. Examples were:

You did this item beautifully.

Well done! You really did your best.

I wouldn't do it better than you.

You have made a great improvement.

This technique was applied alongside other activities. For example, in optimistic thinking activity where they were expected to share their goals and aspirations related to language learning, peers and the teacher provided positive feedback alongside explanations and discussions. Gratitude and respect were fostered mainly in such activities by getting students to show appreciation for each other's compliments and attention and behave respectfully.

**Savoring component** focuses on a given activity and intends to augment its effects for escalating happiness (Peterson, 2006). According to Jon Kabat-Zinn (2009, as cited in Chowdhury, 2020), the main tenet of these activities is to inspire the individual to seize every aspect of the activity; physical, sensory, affective, or social. This technique was applied in this study by asking students to choose topics and/or texts that they enjoyed to work on. So, at the beginning of the instructional period, students were asked to brainstorm their likes and preferences for the topics to be discussed. The teacher made a list of them on the board, and those which the students unanimously agreed as the most favourable and exciting were selected to be worked on. Next, each session either the teacher or students were to bring in a text on one of the chosen topics. Students were required to read the text just for fun. Then, they were asked to express their understanding as well as their feelings about the text. All the students were invited to express their attitudes and provide positive feedback towards each other's feelings. The teacher made sure that students were happy with this technique and wished to keep it up.

**Strength** component in positive psychology has to do with internal abilities and values (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013, as cited in Chowdhury, 2020). Research projects have revealed that cognizance of power helps in lowering unhappiness and rising self-satisfaction (Seligman et al., 2005). As such, for strength-building activity in this study, students were required to keep journals writing about their experiences and their capabilities after each session of instruction. Finally, at the last session of the instructions, they were invited to bring their journals to the class and share them with others by reading through them and talking about their experiences and capabilities.

It has to be mentioned that driven from the sources of anxiety revealed through the initial interviews with students and teachers, there were some other appropriate techniques of positive psychology to be incorporated in class activities in the experimental group. For example, empathy which is fostered through building relationships and bridges the gap between self and others (Chowdhury, 2020) was explicitly brought into the class, as working with others and building strong connection to them turned up as a source of anxiety.





As for the control group, no treatment concerning positive psychology was given and learners followed the conventional syllabus of the language school. The syllabus of the course book (Touchstone) offered communicative, listening, reading, speaking and writing tasks as well as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary exercises.

The whole period of treatment was 20 sessions with each four sessions devoted to one PP-based technique in the experimental group. Finally, the LARS questionnaire was given to the two groups as post-test.

### Results

To address the raised question, an ANCOVA was conducted on the anxiety-reducing strategies scores on pre-treatment and posttest for the two groups. As for the first condition of ANCOVA, normality, skewness values were calculated. Table 1 presents the results.

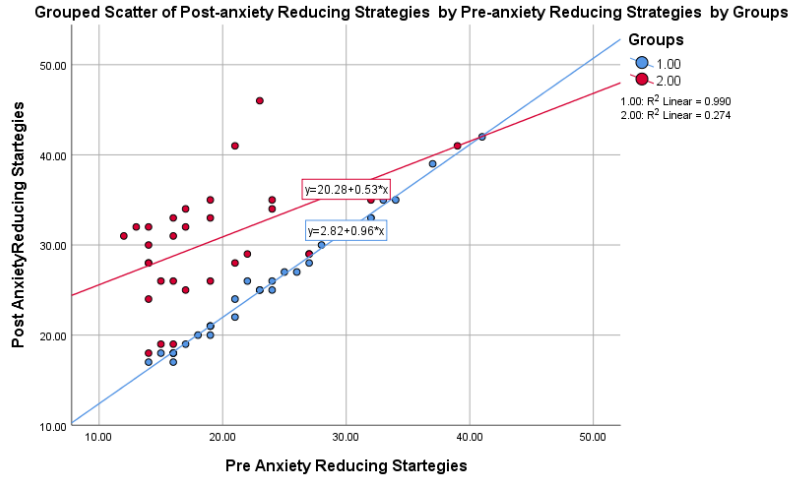
**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Anxiety-reducing Strategies Scores*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis			
								Std. Ratios	Std.		
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Error	Statistic	Error	
Pre-Control Anxiety Reducing Strategies	30	14.00	41.00	23.46677	7.05512	49.775	.779	.427	1.82	.786	.833
Pre-Experimental Anxiety Reducing Strategies	30	12.00	39.00	19.06676	6.19195	38.340	.557	.427	1.30	.621	.833
Post Control Anxiety Reducing Strategies	30	17.00	42.00	25.30006	6.79325	46.148	.681	.427	1.59	.778	.833
Post Experimental Anxiety Reducing Strategies	30	18.00	46.00	30.40006	6.28408	39.490	.552	.427	1.29	.674	.833

As displayed in Table 1, the skewness ratios for the pretest and posttest scores were below 1.96 indicating normalcy of the distributions. Reliability of co-variates, as the second condition, was guaranteed by selecting reliable measure (Pallant, 2010); the questionnaire used in this study for measuring anxiety-reducing strategies was developed by Bekhrad et al. (in press) and checked for both validity and reliability. As there was only one covariate, the multicollinearity assumption was not violated. As for the linearity condition, scatterplot of the variables was probed.

**Figure 1**  
*Scatterplot of Anxiety-reducing Strategies Scores*



As exhibited in Figure 1, a straight diagonal line indicates that the relationship between the pre-treatment posttest scores is linear. Thus, the linearity assumption is not violated. To probe the homogeneity of regression slopes, results in Table 2 were consulted.

**Table 2**  
*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Anxiety-reducing Strategies Scores*

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Post-anxiety Reducing Strategies

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2028.122a	3	676.041	44.775	.000
Intercept	688.333	1	688.333	.489	.228
Groups	393.266	1	393.266	.546	.328
Pre-anxiety	1392.128	1	1392.128	42.202	.005
Groups * pre-anxiety	114.598	1	114.598	.790	.128
Error	845.528	56	15.099		
Total	49411.000	60			
Corrected Total	2873.650	59			

As shown in Table 2, the sig value corresponding to Groups \* pre-anxiety exceeds 0.05, showing that the relationship between the posttest scores and the pre-treatment scores was the same for both groups, hence meeting the assumption. Also shown in the table was the significant impact of the covariate (pre-anxiety) on the post- test scores ( $p=.005 < .05$ ). The homogeneity of variances assumption was checked using the Levene’s test presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Anxiety-reducing Strategies Scores*

F	df1	df2	Sig.
3.765	1	58	.114

As evinced in Table 3, the variances in the pre-treatment and posttest scores bear no significant difference, hence the assumption was met ( $F=3.76$ ,  $P>.05$ ). With the assumptions being met, the ANCOVA analysis was run. Table 4 displays the outcomes of ANCOVA for the anxiety reducing strategies scores.

**Table 4***Results of ANCOVA for the Anxiety Reducing Strategies Scores*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Squared	Eta
Corrected Model	1913.524 <sup>a</sup>	2	956.762	56.800	.000	.666	
Intercept	674.592	1	674.592	40.049	.000	.413	
Pre-anxiety	1523.374	1	1523.374	90.438	.000	.613	
Groups	972.535	1	972.535	57.737	.000	.603	
Error	960.126	57	16.844				
Total	49411.000	60					
Corrected Total	2873.650	59					

As shown in Table 4, the posttest scores of the two groups were significantly different ( $F=57.737$ ,  $p=.000<.05$ ). It is also shown that the initial dissimilarity between the two groups with respect to the covariate had a significant effect on the posttest scores ( $p=.000<.05$ ). To remove this significant effect, estimated marginal means were created and compared as an SPSS output. Table 5 demonstrates the respective results.

**Table 5***Estimated Marginal Means*

Groups	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	23.601	.770	22.059	25.144
Experimental	32.099	.770	30.556	33.641

Based on the marginal and adjusted means, the mean score that the experimental group obtained exceeded the mean obtained by the control group ( $M=32.09 > 23.601$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that teaching positive psychology techniques had a significant effect on anxiety-reducing strategies preference among Iranian EFL learners. To present the magnitude of the reported effect of the independent variable (positive psychology intervention) on the preference for anxiety reducing strategies, the effect size was calculated as a partial output of ANCOVA. As presented in Table 4, the partial eta squared related to groups row is .603 which is a large effect taking Cohen's (1988, as cited in Pallant, 2010) guideline into consideration, showing that the difference between the means is largely due to the effect of positive psychology-based instructions in this study.

## Discussion

This study sought to find out if teaching positive psychology techniques had any significant effect on the preference for anxiety-reducing strategies among Iranian EFL learners. The outcomes of ANCOVA depicted that teaching positive psychology techniques had a significant effect on anxiety-reducing strategies preference among Iranian EFL learners. The findings of the current study corroborate Li and Xu's (2019) findings. Based on PP theories, they carried out an investigation on Emotional Intelligence (EI) as well as two distinctive L2 classroom emotions,

i.e. Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Based on ANCOVA outcomes and qualitative analyses, the PP intervention was found to be enhancing EI, reinforcing positive classroom feelings and reducing negative classroom feelings. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted, positive psychology highlights the role of positive emotions and thus can decrease negative feelings such as anxiety. In a similar vein, as Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) maintained, positive psychology instructions are activities intended to increase the incidence of positive feelings.

Moreover, the experimental results of this investigation could be explained considering the arguments provided by MacIntyre et al. (2019) who asserted that positive psychology-based instructions in L2 learning and teaching are perceived to enhance interpersonal contacts and positive feelings, reducing anxiety, increasing happiness each of which could tenably be considered as an effective factor in reducing anxiety and preference for using anxiety reducing strategies.

As self-esteem is regarded as an important factor in reducing anxiety, the findings of the current research corroborate those of Narafshan and Noori (2018). They sought to examine the potential of Positive Psychology instructions to boost self-esteem. The results demonstrated a significant increase in the participants' self-esteem in the experimental group.

The findings of the present investigation concerning the positive impact of PP on the use of anxiety-reducing strategies by learners can be justified on the grounds of the main tenets of PP, which has the promotion of well-being at its core. As Seligman (2011) noted, PP can foster positive feelings, engagement, contacts, and achievement, which act as antecedents to a sense of well-being. Accordingly, learners in the present study, due to exposure to PP, might have become more emotionally engaged in tackling with their anxiety through adopting anxiety-reduction strategies. Moreover, through asking the peers and the teacher for more help they might have become more involved in meaningful relationships aiming at accomplishing their goal of reducing anxiety.

### **Conclusion**

The outcomes of the present investigation both support and are supported by the findings of previous investigations (e.g., Li & Xu, 2019; Narafshan & Noori, 2018; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Weiss et al., 2016) concerning the contributions of PP implementation to lowering negative feelings such as stress and anxiety and promoting positive aspects such as self-esteem. Moreover, the results of this investigation substantiate the theoretical explanations pertinent to PP provided in the literature (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2019; Seligman, 2011).

The outcomes of the present research have some pedagogical implications. Since this investigation showed that psychology-based instructions can increase the preference for anxiety-reducing strategies, teachers are advised to include positive psychology interventions in their teaching practice to the extent possible to help learners deal with their negative emotions and opt for adopting strategies to reduce their anxiety. For instance, teachers can help learners develop positive emotions to become more engaged in learning and practice towards accomplishing their language learning goals.

Materials developers are advised to incorporate texts and activities which encompass different strategies learners can draw on to tackle their foreign language learning anxiety. For example, it will be optimal if engaging reading texts are chosen to pique the learners' interest. They are recommended to consider techniques that reduce learners' anxiety associated with components of positive psychology in the activities and exercises. Accordingly, the use of materials including the promotion of positive emotions is recommended.



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### Biodata

**Alireza Bekhrad** is a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL. He received his B.A. in Management and M.A. in TEFL. His research interests include psycholinguistics and language teaching and learning.

Email: [alireza004616@gmail.com](mailto:alireza004616@gmail.com)

**Behdokht Mall-Amiri** is an Assistant Professor in Applied Linguistics and a faculty member since 1998. She teaches courses such as, research methodology, teaching language skills at MA and Ph.D. levels.

Email: [beh.malamiri@iau.ac.ir](mailto:beh.malamiri@iau.ac.ir)

**Nasim Shangarffam** is an Assistant Professor in Applied Linguistics and a faculty member Since 1998, she has taught courses such as, research methodology, materials development at various levels.

Email: [nshangarf@yahoo.com](mailto:nshangarf@yahoo.com)

### Appendix LARS Questionnaire

	No	Item	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
Metacognitive	1	I usually think about what I can do to reduce my anxiety when I feel anxious.					
	2	I always think about why I get anxious while learning English.					
	3	I use a checklist to note how many times I get anxious in my English class.					
	4	I usually stop and start thinking of a relaxing scenery when I am anxious.					
	5	I usually think about what I can do to prevent my anxiety in learning English.					
Social	6	I always ask the teacher to explain more when I do not understand what to do.					
	7	I normally ask the teacher for specific strategies I can use to reduce my anxiety.					
	8	I always ask the teacher or other learners for assistance when a particular activity or learning situation is making me anxious.					



	<b>9</b>	I usually ask other learners how they deal with their anxiety when learning English.					
<b>Tactile</b>	<b>10</b>	I always have a chewing gum with me to use when I feel anxious.					
	<b>11</b>	I usually do deep breathing when I feel anxious.					
	<b>12</b>	I usually stretch myself or go out of the class for a short walk.					
	<b>13</b>	I always take a tactile instrument with me to toy with while I feel anxious.					



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