Interrelations of Stress Coping Strategies, Foreign Language Anxiety, and Language Achievement among Iraqi EFL Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the interrelations among stress coping strategies, foreign language anxiety (FLA), and language achievement among Iraqi EFL students. Utilizing a correlational research design, the study involved 150 upper-intermediate EFL learners from two universities in Iraq. Participants completed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) to assess their levels of anxiety and coping strategies. The results indicate a significant negative relationship between task-oriented coping strategies and foreign language anxiety, as well as a positive correlation between task-oriented coping and language achievement. The findings highlight the importance of effective coping strategies in mitigating anxiety and enhancing language learning outcomes among EFL learners. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for instructors to foster task-oriented coping strategies to improve language achievement and reduce anxiety, thereby creating a more supportive and effective learning environment.

Keywords: Stress coping strategies, foreign language anxiety, language achievement, EFL learners

رابطه متقابل راهبردهای مقابله با استرس، اضطراب زبان خارجی و پیشرفت زبان در دانشجویان عراقی زبان انگلیسی

این پژوهش به بررسی رابطه متقابل بین راهبردهای مقابله با استرس، اضطراب زبان خارجی)FLA(و پیشرفت زبان بین دانشجویان عراقی زبان انگلیسی می پردازد. با استفاده از یک طرح تحقیق همبستگی، این مطالعه شامل ۱۵۰ زبان آموز انگلیسی زبان انگلیسی در سطح متوسط از دو دانشگاه در عراق بود. شرکت کنندگان مقیاس اضطراب کلاس درس زبان خارجی)FLCAS(و پرسشنامه مقابله با موقعیت های استرس زا)CISS(را برای ارزیابی سطح اضطراب و راهبردهای مقابله ای خود تکمیل کردند. نتایج حاکی از وجود رابطه منفی معنادار بین راهبردهای مقابله تکلیف مدار و اضطراب زبان خارجی و همچنین رابطه مثبت بین مقابله تکلیف مدار و پیشرفت زبان است. یافتهها بر اهمیت استراتژیهای مقابلهای مؤثر در کاهش اضطراب و افزایش نتایج یادگیری زبان در بین زبانآموزان زبان انگلیسی تأکید میکنند. علاوه بر این، این پژوهش بر نیاز مربیان به پرورش مکانیسمهای مقابلهای وظیفه محور برای بهبود پیشرفت زبان و کاهش اضطراب و در نتیجه ایجاد یک محیط یادگیری حمایتکننده تر و مؤثرتر تأکید میکند.

کلمات کلیدی: راهبردهای مقابله با استرس، اضطراب زبان خارجی، پیشرفت زبان، زبان آموزان عراقی زبان انگلیسی

Introduction

An investigation of the interrelationships between stress coping strategies, foreign language anxiety (FLA), and language achievement is being carried out among Iraqi students who are learning English as a foreign language for the objective of this study. Anxiety, which is a key worry in the context of language acquisition, is a widespread condition that can have a substantial impact on the overall success and performance of language learners. Language learners often struggle with anxiety. Students who suffer from foreign language anxiety (FLA), which is characterized by feelings of nervousness and tension when using a foreign language, may have difficulty communicating effectively and accomplishing their academic goals. Other symptoms of FLA include a lack of confidence in their ability to communicate in the target language. Foreign language acquisition (FLA) has been shown to be associated with avoidance behaviors, a decrease in engagement in classroom activities, and a general drop in language competency, according to study that was conducted not too long ago (Khan et al., 2021; Liu & Huang, 2011).

Learners have access to essential resources that can assist them in managing stress and anxiety, and these tools are referred to as coping strategies. In accordance with the findings of Folkman et al. (1986), coping strategies can be classified into two distinct categories: problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping methods. On the other hand, the objective of tactics that are problem-focused is to treat the source of stress, whereas the objective of strategies that are emotion-focused is to control emotional reactions. There have been recent research that have thrown light on the significance of adaptive coping strategies in terms of reducing levels of anxiety and improving academic performance (Kumar & Kumar, 2020; Sadeghi & Gholami, 2022). Having a solid understanding of the ways in which these coping strategies are related to language achievement and the acquisition of foreign languages is essential for the purpose of establishing successful interventions that assist students in overcoming anxiety and improving their academic performance. This understanding is necessary for the purpose of establishing successful interventions.

Iraqi students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are a population that has received a very small amount of attention in the research that has been conducted on the topic of the connection between coping strategies, anxiety, and language achievement. Due to the fact that it

is solely focused on Iraqi students of English as a foreign language, this study is quite valuable. This research aims to provide insights that can be used to inform teaching strategies and support services for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Iraq by evaluating these relationships. The research will be conducted in Iraq. We believe that the findings will make an addition to the existing body of literature on anxiety and coping strategies in language instruction, and we expect those contributions. More particular, they will emphasize the importance of individualized interventions that encourage healthy coping strategies and lessen anxiety in situations when English is being taught to students who are learning English as a foreign language.

Literature Review

The findings of study that was carried out by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) indicated that anxiety regarding the acquisition of a foreign language can have a detrimental effect on the attainment of language development. For children who feel significant levels of anxiety, it is easy for them to avoid participating in classroom activities. This can lead to missed opportunities for practice and progress, which can be detrimental to their academic performance. Students who have a high FLA, for instance, have a tendency to have lower scores on language proficiency exams and are less likely to participate in activities that require them to speak (Aida, 2021; Elkhafaifi, 2005). This is according to research that was conducted not too long ago. However, Garnefski et al. (2002) discovered that effective coping strategies can lessen the negative effects of anxiety and lead to improved outcomes in regard to language learning. This was proven to be the case.

Task-oriented coping strategies have been connected to lower levels of anxiety as well as higher levels of academic performance, as indicated by the findings of additional study that was conducted in the past (Compas et al., 2006). For instance, Hassan and Khoshsima (2022) found that students who actively seek out social support and make use of problem-solving skills are more likely to have lower levels of anxiety and to attain higher levels of academic success. It is also more probable that these students will be successful in their academic endeavors. Avoidance strategies, on the other hand, have the potential to exacerbate anxiety and hinder language achievement because they prevent students from directly confronting challenges (Smith et al., 2013). As a result, students are prevented from accomplishing their linguistic objectives. The findings of a study that was carried out by Khosravi and Khosravi (2021) lend credence to this concept. The study reveals that students who engage in avoidance coping strategies report higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of language achievement.

When it comes to the setting of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, the relationship between coping strategies and anxiety assumes a particularly significant level of significance. Students that make use of adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking assistance from their classmates or instructors, have been shown to be better able to control their anxiety

and achieve higher levels of language competence, according to research conducted by Kumar and Kumar in 2020. Additionally, effective coping strategies have the potential to promote motivation and engagement, which further adds to enhanced results in language acquisition (Sadeghi & Gholami, 2022).

Despite the existing amount of literature, there is a paucity of research that analyzes the interrelationships between stress coping methods, anxiety about learning a foreign language, and language achievement, particularly among Iraqi students of English as a second language. This is especially true in the context of Iraqi students. This gap will be addressed through the exploration of these relationships and the offering of insights that may guide teaching methodologies and support services for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Iraq. The objective of this project is to try to fill this gap. When instructors have a better understanding of the ways in which coping strategies influence anxiety and achievement, they are better able to create targeted interventions that will assist students in more effectively navigating the obstacles that are associated with language learning.

Research Questions

Based on the above-stated issues, the following research questions were addressed in the current research

RQ1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' stress coping strategies and their language achievement?

1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' task coping strategies and their language achievement?

2. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' emotion coping strategies and their language achievement?

3. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' avoidance coping strategies and their language achievement?

RQ2. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' stress coping strategies and their foreign language anxiety?

1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' task coping strategies and their foreign language anxiety?

2. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' emotion coping strategies and their foreign language anxiety?

3. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' avoidance coping strategies and their foreign language anxiety?

RQ3. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' foreign language anxiety and their language achievement?

Methodology
Design of the Study
This study employed a correlational research design to explore the relationships among stress coping strategies, foreign language anxiety, and language achievement. The design allowed for the examination of how different coping strategies impact learners' anxiety levels and academic performance.

Participants

The participants in this study were 150 upper-intermediate EFL learners enrolled in English courses at two universities in Iraq. The participants were selected based on their proficiency level, ensuring a homogeneous group. Their ages ranged from 21 to 38 years, with a balanced representation of male (67) and female (83) learners.

Instruments

The following instruments were used in the present study:

1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

Developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope in 1986, the FLCAS is a widely used instrument to measure foreign language anxiety in classroom settings. The scale consists of 33 items that assess various aspects of foreign language anxiety, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree.

  - Examples of items include:

   - "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class."

   - "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class."

   - "I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make."

The FLCAS has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.93 to 0.96. Scores on the FLCAS can range from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating higher levels of foreign language anxiety.

2. Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS)

The CISS was developed by Endler and Parker in 1990 to assess an individual's coping strategies in response to stressful situations. The inventory includes 48 items that measure three main types of coping strategies:

   1. Task-oriented coping: Focuses on solving the problem or changing the situation.

   2. Emotion-oriented coping: Involves emotional reactions that are self-oriented.

   3. Avoidance coping: Includes activities and cognitive changes aimed at avoiding the stressful situation.

Each type of coping strategy is measured by 16 items, resulting in a total of 48 items. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much".

- Examples of items include:

  - Task-oriented: "Focus on the problem and see how I can solve it."

  - Emotion-oriented: "Blame myself for having gotten into this situation."

  - Avoidance: "Watch TV" or "Go to a party."

The CISS has demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.76 to 0.92 for the three coping scales. Scores for each coping strategy can range from 16 to 80, with higher scores indicating a greater tendency to use that particular coping strategy.

These instruments have been widely used in research on foreign language anxiety and coping strategies, providing reliable and valid measures of these constructs in various educational contexts.

Data Collection Procedure

The participants completed the FLCAS and CISS questionnaires in a controlled classroom environment. They were provided with clear instructions and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The data collection took approximately one hour, during which participants filled out both questionnaires. This process ensured that participants could focus on the tasks without distractions.

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analyzed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS) to determine the relationships among the variables. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the participants' anxiety levels and coping strategies. Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between stress coping strategies, foreign language anxiety, and language achievement.

Results

The following tables present the results of the analysis of the collected data:

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Learners' Stress Coping Strategies

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Task	150	24.00	79.00	56.32	10.14
Emotion	150	19.00	81.00	48.11	10.01
Avoidance	150	23.00	63.00	50.57	10.32
Valid N (listwise)	150				

As Table 1 shows, task received the highest mean (*M*=56.32, *SD*=10.14). In other words, students who took part in the present study had task-oriented stress coping strategy in fronting stress more frequently than emotion and avoidance stress coping strategies.

Descriptive statistics of foreign language anxiety and students' achievement are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Learners' Anxiety and Achievement

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Anxiety	150	38.00	160.00	98.06	13.91
Achievement	150	12.80	20.00	16.47	5.02
Valid N (listwise)	150				

As it is shown, the mean of foreign language anxiety is 98.06, and mean score of students' achievement equals 16.47. To check the normality of data distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run. In this test, if the *p*-value is non-significant (*p*>.05), the distribution of a sample is not significantly different from a normal distribution, hence it is normal. It the *p*-value is significant (*p*<.05) it indicates that the distribution is not normal. Table 3 illustrates the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

Table 3
The Results of K-S Test for Stress Coping Strategies, Anxiety, and Language Achievement

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Task	.063	149	.100[*]
Emotion	.086	149	.102[*]
Avoidance	.091	149	.200[*]
Anxiety	.086	149	.183[*]
Language Achievement	.093	149	.200[*]

As Table 3 shows, the sig value for all variables (Stress Coping Strategies, Anxiety, and Language Achievement) is higher than .05. Therefore, it can be concluded that the data is normally distributed across the three variables. Besides, the reliability estimates of each variable computed via Cronbach's alpha were found to be as follows: stress coping strategies (α= .81) and anxiety (α= .82).

Results for the First Research Question

To answer the first research question as well as its sub-questions concerning the relationship between students' stress coping strategies and their language achievement, a Pearson product-moment correlation was used. The results of correlation indicated that there is a significant correlation between EFL students' stress coping strategies and their language achievement. Besides, to evaluate the associations among the components of strategies (task, emotion, and avoidance) and language achievement, multiple correlations were applied. Table 4 reveals the results.

Table 4
The Correlation between Stress Coping Strategies and Language Achievement

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Task	1.00			
2. Emotion	-.049	1.00		
3. Avoidance	.176*	.063	1.00	
4. Achievement	.711**	-.342**	.123*	1.00

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As the table indicates, there is a significant, strong, and positive correlation between task coping strategies and language achievement (r = 0.711, p < 0.05). Avoidance strategies are also correlated with achievement but shows a weak relationship (r = 0.123, p < 0.05). Achievement is negatively associated with emotion coping strategies (r = -0.342, p < 0.05).

Results for the Second Research Question

To evaluate the relationship between EFL students' stress coping strategies and their foreign language anxiety, a Pearson product-moment correlation was applied. The results are depicted in Table 5.

Table 5
The Correlation between Stress Coping Strategies and Their Foreign Language Anxiety

	1	2	3	4
1. Task coping strategies	1			
2. Emotion coping strategies	-.124	1		
3. Avoidance coping strategies	.235	.127	1	
4. Anxiety	-.811**	.326**	.134	1

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

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As the table shows, there is a negative significant relationship between students' task coping strategies and their language anxiety (r = .811, p < 0.05). It means that students who use task stress coping strategies in learning experience lower levels of anxiety. Moreover, there is a positive significant correlation between anxiety and emotion strategies, however no significant relationship was observed between anxiety and avoidance strategies.

Results for the Third Research Question

To assess the relationship between EFL students' anxiety and their language achievement, a Pearson product-moment correlation was applied. The results are depicted in Table 6.

Table 6
The Correlation between Anxiety and their Language Achievement

	1	2
1. Anxiety	1	
2. Achievement	-.612**	1

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

As can be seen, there is a negative significant relationship between anxiety and their language achievement (r = 0.612, p < 0.05).

Table 7

The ANOVA Table of Regression

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	7407.78	1	7407.78	4.12	.046[b]
	Residual	125757.71	149	1796.53		
	Total	133165.50	150			

a. Dependent Variable: language achievement
b. Predictors: (Constant), stress coping strategies

      To analyze the data further, a regression analysis was conducted. Tables 8 and 9 present the results which indicate that learners' total score of stress coping strategies is a predictor of the dependent variable (language achievement).

Table 8

The Results of Regression Analysis for Stress Coping Strategies and Language Achievement

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	218.91	43.46		5.03	.000
	Stress Coping Strategies	.53	.26	.23	2.03	.046

a. Dependent Variable: language achievement

Table 9

R Square Table for Stress Coping Strategies as the Predictor of Language Achievement

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.236[a]	.056	.261	42.38560

Predictors: (Constant), Stress coping strategies   .a
.b

      Table 9 illustrates the model summary statistics. The results reveal that the model containing the total scores of the stress coping strategies can predict language achievement. The R value is 0.23, which indicates the correlation coefficient between the two variables. Its square

value is 0.261 so it indicates that about 26% of the variation in language achievement can be explained by taking stress coping strategies into account.

Discussion

Among Iraqi students of English as a foreign language, the findings of this study indicate that stress coping strategies have a substantial influence on both anxiety about learning a foreign language and language achievement. To be more specific, the fact that there is a positive association between task-oriented coping methods and language achievement highlights how important it is to provide students with appropriate coping strategies in order to help them better control their anxiety and improve their academic performance. This correlates with the findings of recent research conducted by Hassan and Khoshsima (2022), who discovered that students who apply problem-solving skills and seek social support tend to suffer less anxiety and perform better academically.

This shows that learners who actively participate in problem-solving are less likely to suffer anxiety in the context of language learning. This is because the negative link between task-oriented coping and anxiety over learning a foreign language suggests that this relationship exists. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Khosravi and Khosravi (2021), which demonstrated that students who employ adaptive coping techniques, such as asking assistance from their classmates or teachers, are better equipped to control their anxiety and attain higher levels of language proficiency among themselves. The body of research conducted by Garnefski et al. (2002) provides more evidence in favor of the idea that effective coping methods have the potential to reduce anxiety and improve the findings of language learning.

On the other hand, the fact that there is a positive association between emotion-oriented coping strategies and worry over learning a foreign language brings to light the possible consequences of relying on emotional regulation as a method of relief from stress. There is a possibility that students who predominantly employ tactics that are focused on emotions will not be able to successfully address the sources of their worry. This might result in greater feelings of apprehension and a detrimental influence on their language achievement. According to the findings of a recent study conducted by Kumar and Kumar (2020), which revealed that children who engage in avoidance coping techniques reported higher levels of anxiety and lower language achievement, this is in line with the findings of the study.

The findings of this study have a wide range of consequences. Instructors should incorporate instruction on appropriate coping methods into their teaching practices in order to assist students in managing their anxiety and improving their academic performance. This is confirmed by the findings of Sadeghi and Gholami (2022), who discovered that instructors are able to construct focused interventions to assist students in more effectively navigating the barriers of language acquisition if they have a grasp of how coping strategies influence anxiety and achievement. Furthermore, the creation of a supportive classroom climate that promotes open communication and teamwork might further boost the students' ability to cope with difficult situations.

The long-term consequences of coping strategies on language achievement and anxiety should be investigated in future study. When doing this research, longitudinal designs should be

utilized to evaluate changes that occur over time. This would allow for the investigation of specific interventions that are aimed at strengthening coping skills and reducing anxiety among EFL learners in a variety of cultural situations, as well as providing a more complete understanding of the dynamics that are at play. The findings of Khan et al. (2021) and Liu and Huang (2011), who highlighted the negative influence of foreign language anxiety on learners' participation, engagement, and overall language competency, indicate the significance of this line of research. Both of these investigations highlight the importance of this line of research.

Concluding Remarks

In Iraqi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, this study makes a contribution to the knowledge of the interrelationships between stress coping methods, anxiety about learning a foreign language, and language achievement. In order to improve language achievement and decrease anxiety, the findings underscore how important it is to cultivate coping skills that are task-oriented. To be more specific, the fact that there is a positive association between task-oriented coping and language achievement highlights how important it is to provide students with good coping methods in order to help them better manage their anxiety and improve their academic performance. This shows that learners who actively participate in problem-solving are less likely to suffer anxiety in the context of language learning. This is because the negative link between task-oriented coping and anxiety over learning a foreign language suggests that this relationship exists. This is in line with the findings of recent studies that indicate that students who make use of adaptive coping strategies, such as asking assistance from their classmates or teachers, are better equipped to control their anxiety and attain higher levels of language competence (Hassan & Khoshsima, 2022; Khosravi & Khosravi, 2021).On the other hand, the fact that there is a positive association between emotion-oriented coping strategies and worry over learning a foreign language brings to light the possible consequences of relying on emotional regulation as a method of relief from stress. There is a possibility that students who predominantly employ tactics that are focused on emotions will not be able to successfully address the sources of their worry. This might result in greater feelings of apprehension and a detrimental influence on their language achievement. This finding is in line with the findings of Kumar and Kumar (2020), who discovered that students who engage in avoidance coping techniques reported higher levels of anxiety and lower language achievement. This finding is compatible with their findings.

The findings of this study have a wide range of consequences. Instructors should incorporate instruction on appropriate coping methods into their teaching practices in order to assist students in managing their anxiety and improving their academic performance. When instructors have a better grasp of the ways in which coping strategies influence anxiety and achievement, they are better able to devise targeted interventions that could assist students in more effectively navigating the problems associated with language learning (Sadeghi & Gholami, 2022). Furthermore, the creation of a supportive classroom climate that promotes open communication and teamwork might further boost the students' ability to cope with difficult situations. This is consistent with the idea that cultivating a positive learning environment is essential for achieving the goals of boosting adaptive coping strategies and reducing anxiety among students of English as a foreign language (Khan et al., 2021).

The long-term consequences of coping strategies on language achievement and anxiety should be investigated in future study. When doing this research, longitudinal designs should be utilized to evaluate changes that occur over time. This would allow for the investigation of specific interventions that are aimed at strengthening coping skills and reducing anxiety among EFL learners in a variety of cultural situations, as well as providing a more complete understanding of the dynamics that are at play.In addition, research might be conducted to assess the efficacy of specific interventions that are intended to improve coping skills and decrease anxiety levels among Iraqi students of English as a foreign language. Researchers have the opportunity to obtain vital insights into the most effective techniques for supporting learners in managing stress and enhancing language learning outcomes by putting these treatments into practice and evaluating their effectiveness. The findings of Liu and Huang (2011), who showed the negative impact of foreign language anxiety on learners' participation, engagement, and overall language competency, underline the significance of this line of research and highlight the value of this line of research. Researchers have the potential to make a contribution to the development of more successful language learning programs and support services for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Iraq and beyond if they continue to investigate the links between coping techniques, anxiety, and educational accomplishments.

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