Examining the Relationship Between Students' Levels of Perfectionism and Their Achievements in English Learning

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Abstract

Individual variables in foreign language learning have received considerableattention in foreign language learning research in recent years. However, little research exists that has investigated the relationship between students' levels of perfectionism and their achievements in the foreign language learning classroom settings. To bridge this gap, this study aims to answer whether there is a significant relationship between student's levels of perfectionism and their English achievement. The population of this study is defined as all third grade students (N=239, 110 males and 129 females) who learn English in the public schools of ministry of education in a small city in the Northern Khorasan. All these students participated in the study, so the sample size includes the whole population. Participants' scores on their levels of perfectionism were measured by a questionnaire and their scores of the final English exam were also used as the measure of their English achievements. The results indicated that there isn't any significant relationship between students' levels of perfectionism and their achievement (F = .515, p > .05); although an association between perfectionism and academic achievement has been found in a number of previous studies, perfectionism was not proved to be of great significance in the EFL learning process in the current study. At the end, some implications for both teachers and learners, and suggestions for future research are provided.
Keywords: **Perfectionism, English Language Achievement, High School Third Grade Students**

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is defined as a high standard of performance accompanied by a tendency to critical self-evaluation (Frost, Marten, Lahart, &Rosenblate, 1990). According to Yao (2009), it has both a positive side and a negative side as has been regarded with ambivalence in psychological research. In contrast, researchers like Frost, et al. (1990), and Hewitt and Flett (1991) depicted perfectionism in a pathological light, emphasizing its self-destructive nature.

The scarcity of studies examining the concept of perfectionism in the field of language learning on one hand, and the explicit lack of research on this concept in Iran, on the other, convinced the researcher

to conduct the present study aiming at investigating the relationship between students' levels of perfectionism and their achievements in English learning.

The present study provides practical insights for researchers and teachers, as well as language learners by answering the research question of whether there is a significant relationship between the levels of high school third-graders' perfectionism and their English achievement. The findings of this study help English teachers to be more aware of their students' psychological needs during the process of language teaching-learning.

Perfectionism was first broadly defined as the effect of overly critical evaluations and high personal standards on the setting of personal goals (Burns, 1980). It is also defined as the "overdependence of self-evaluation on the determined pursuit of personally demanding, self-imposed standards in at least one highly salient domain despite adverse consequences" (Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002, p. 778).

In this study, perfectionism is considered as a multidimensional construct and involves three components: high personal standards, order or organization and discrepancy (defined as the perceived difference between one's standards and expectations and one's actual performance). According to this view of perfectionism, high standards and order represent the more adaptive aspects of perfectionism, whereas discrepancy is the defining aspect of maladaptive perfectionism (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001).

In the present study, English achievement refers to the students' scores on their final English exam which is held countrywide. The final grade was selected mainly because it has been used as a global measure of language proficiency by several researchers (e.g., Chastain, 1975; Gliksman, Gardner &Padric, 1982; Horwitz& Cope, 1991; as cited in Chen, 2007).

Furthermore, considering the review of the literature presented above, following points can be made: 1) There are quite few studies conducted in Iran regarding language learners' perfectionism and language achievement, and 2) There are only a few studies done abroad regarding the impacts of perfectionism on academic achievement, and more specifically English achievement.

On this basis, the researcher felt the need to conduct the present study in order to contribute to the existing literature by examining the effects learners' perfectionism have on their achievement in English language classroom.

Through the findings of this study, the teachers will become more aware of students' psychological needs during the process of language teaching-learning, and provide proper assistance to overcome students' certain frustrations in foreign language learning. Furthermore, the results from this study can serve as a good guide, causing to reduce the levels of anxiety for those foreign language learners who are anxious in English classes.

Perfectionists believe they are a failure if not all of their goals are completed without any mistakes. Failure to achieve their goals results in a lack of personal worth (Frost & Marten, 1990; Shafran, Cooper & Fairburn, 2002). Perfectionists also believe that if they let others see their flaws they will not be accepted. They commonly believe that others achieve success with minimal effort or stress, while they feel they have to work hard without obtaining success (Frost & Marten, 1990). Taken together, these irrational beliefs can lead to the experience of negative emotions, such as shame, guilt and embarrassment (Tangney, 2002).

The different dimensions of perfectionism have been found to contribute differentially to maladaptive and adaptive outcomes. Regarding the Hewitt and Flett (1991) perspective, socially-prescribed perfectionism

is more strongly and consistently linked to maladjustment, although self-oriented perfectionism is associated to a lesser extentwith maladjustment (Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan & Mikail, 1991; as cited in Yao, 2009). This may be because self-oriented perfectionists are more selective in the domains in which they require perfection, and may select tasks that are easily achieved. Socially-prescribed perfectionists, in contrast, may feel like they have little choice in the tasks in which perfection is required, as standards are imposed by others (Tangney, 2002). Other-oriented perfectionism is the dimension thought to be least associated with maladjustment.

An association between perfectionism and academic achievement has been found. Although both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists strive to achieve, it is thought that maladaptive perfectionism has a negative impact on academic achievement, while adaptive perfectionism can have a positive impact. Blankstein and Dunkley (2002) suggest that socially-prescribed perfectionism has been associated with maladaptive learning strategies, while Arthur and Hayward (1997) found that socially-prescribed perfectionism in first year tertiary students was associated with lower academic achievement. Conroy (2003) has suggested that a fear of failure in perfectionists has been associated with problems in achievement.

On the other hand, adaptive perfectionism is thought to have a positive association with achievement. Flett, Sawatzky and Hewitt (1995) found an association between high personal standards and high academic achievement at school. Additionally, a study by Accordino, Accordino, & Slaney (2000) found that having high personal standards was positively and significantly associated with GPA, and supports the idea that students with adaptive forms of perfectionism tend to have higher levels of achievement. Regarding the Flett and Hewitt perspective, self-oriented perfectionism is seen as the most relevant to achievement-related outcomes at school (Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002).

As it was mentioned earlier, in Iran, there are quite few studies which have had their focus on the constructs investigated in this research. The most related study is the one performed by Pishghadam and Akhondpoor (2011) where the researchers examined the role of learner perfectionism in foreign language learning success, and academic achievement. A sample of 300 junior and senior students of English in Mashhad universities completed Ahwaz Perfectionism Scale (2000). Students' grades of four skills (reading, speaking, listening, and writing) and GPA were also obtained through the questionnaires. The results of the correlational analysis indicated a negative significant relationship between skills of reading, speaking, listening, GPA. Further analysis of data was also conducted. Students were divided into successful and unsuccessful groups with regard to their scores in the skills and GPA, and then perfectionism level of successful and unsuccessful groups were compared. The results of *t*-tests confirmed the results of the correlational analysis except for GPA. Altogether, the findings of this study showed how perfectionistic tendencies in language learners were associated with low academic achievement and poor performance in language skills.

In another study, Roohafza, Afshar, Sadeghi, Soleymani, Saadaty, Matinpour & Asadollahi (2010) investigated the association among the dimensions of perfectionism with the academic achievement and other psychopathologies, such as depression and anxiety. Their study investigated these relationships in an Iranian school-age sample including 793 students. Negative and positive perfectionisms were found to be positive and negative predictors, respectively, for depression ($p<0.001$) and

anxiety ($p<0.001$) and conversely, negative and positive predictors for academic achievement, respectively ($p<0.001$).

2. Method
2.1. Participants
The population of the current study was all third-graders studying at 20 high schools in a city of Northern Khorasan, including 310 males and 321 females (N=631). The size of the sample was measured as 239 with the 95% confidence level and the confidence interval of 5. However, since the researcher predicted lack of cooperation from a number of subjects, 350 copies of the consent form and the set of questionnaires to be used were printed and distributed.

Among all the 350 participants investigated, 239 students (110 males and 129 females) who provided complete responses to the questionnaires were selected randomly. Regarding the academic majors of the participants, 52% studied humanities while 31% studied science, and 17% studied mathematics.

2.2. Instruments
The Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R) questionnaire was administered to participants as one of the major sources of data, The participants' scores on their English language final exam were used as the indicator of their English achievement. In addition to the main questionnaire, a background questionnaire was handed to the participants to collect some demographic information about them.

In regard to the purpose and context of this study, APS-R was translated from English into Persian in a three-step process (Hambleton, 1994) with the permission of Robert B. Slaney, the original developer of the APS-R. First, the researcher translated the scales into Persian, and then a TEFL doctoral student and two MA TEFL students back-translated the translated Persian versions into English independently. Both the translator and the back-translators were fluent in English and Persian. Next, the researcher and an MA professor of psychology compared the back-translated English versions with their original English versions and noted any differences in the scales. The reviewers (except the researcher) did not have a priori knowledge about the APS-R; thus, possible biases from knowing the contents of the scale could be minimized. The final Persian version of the instruments was provided as an alternative to the English version for participants to complete.

2.2.1. The Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R)
The Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) was used to assess levels and dimensions of perfectionism. The revised version of the Almost Perfect Scale consists of 23 items designed to assess both adaptive and maladaptive components of perfectionism. The APS-R contains three subscales for High Standards (7 items), Order (4 items), and Discrepancy (12 items).

Sample items include "I expect the best from myself" (High Standards), "I like to always be organized and disciplined" (Order), and "My performance rarely measures up to my standards" (Discrepancy). Participants respond to the items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). Each subscale is scored independently by summing the individual item values. Total scores for the entire instrument range from 23 to 161.Total scores for the subscales range from 7 to 49 for Standards, 4 to 28 for Order, and 12 to 84 for Discrepancy. Higher scores on the subscales indicate higher levels of standards, order, and discrepancy. Total score for overall perfectionism and subscale scores were used in the current study.

Groups of adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and non-perfectionists were identified using cluster

analysis. Consistent with previous studies, a two-step procedure using hierarchical and nonhierarchical analyses was performed. Coefficient alphas for the High Standards, Order, and Discrepancy subscales were reported as .72, .40, and .86, respectively. The reliability of the complete APS-R scale was estimated as .85.

2.2.2. English Language Achievement Test

The third-grade English language final exam was prepared by Iran Ministry of Education (Assessment and Evaluation Center) and was held throughout the country. The test is developed on the basis of materials being taught through the third year of high school, and designed to measure students' overall achievement in English, more particularly their achievement in mastering the content of English Book 3. This test includes subtests of spelling, vocabulary, structure, reading comprehension, and some others related to the materials covered in the course. By definition, this test can be considered as a general achievement test (Farhady, Ja'farpur, &Birjandi, 2006).

The final English grade was selected mainly because it has been used as a global measure of language proficiency by numerous researchers (e.g., Chastain, 1975; Gliksman, Gardner &Padric, 1982; Horwitz& Cope, 1991; as cited in Chen, 2007: 34). Participants' scores on the test were obtained through their printed academic report.

2.3. Procedure

In this section, the procedures for administering the present study are addressed in detail. The first step was to translate the questionnaire from English to Persian since no Persian version of APS-R was available. After asking for permission from Robert B. Slaney, the developer of APS-R, a three-step process of translation, back-translation and review was performed by the researcher. Finally, the data were collected at ten high schools.

4. Results and Discussions
4.1. Data Analysis

The research was a correlation design utilizing survey methodology. In light of the research question, a survey research design was adopted. With regard to the research question addressed in the current study, a main questionnaire (i.e. APS-R) was utilized and accordingly several data analytic approaches were used.

In terms of students' English achievement, students' final English course scores were employed as the indication of their general English achievement. Accordingly, with regard to the first research question, the independent variables included High Standards, Order, Discrepancy, and overall Perfectionism as self-rated on the APS-R.The dependent variable was students' English achievement. ANOVA was carried out to answer the research question.

The research question of the study was whether there is a relationship between perfectionism and English achievement. Cluster analysis was used on the total sample of participants in order to identify groupings of perfectionists and non-perfectionists based on their scores on the subscales of the APS-R. The procedure used in this study was based on procedures used by researchers who have used cluster analysis to identify perfectionists in previous studies (Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, & Rice, 2004; Rice &Mirzadeh. 2000; Rice & Slaney, 2002; Yao, 2009). Consistent with these previous studies, a two-step procedure using hierarchical and nonhierarchical analyses was performed.

Hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's linkage method and the squared Euclidian distance measure was first performed to determine groupings. APS-R subscale scores were standardized and used throughout subsequent analyses. Within-cluster sums of squares were used to assess

the internal homogeneity of the various cluster solutions.

The resulting agglomeration solution provided support for either a three-cluster or six-cluster solution. Examination of the change in agglomeration coefficients yielded a 35.6% change for the three-cluster solution and a 13.8% change for the six cluster solution. Due to the stronger support for the three-cluster solution and its consistency with theoretical expectations, this solution was used as the basis for subsequent steps in the analysis.

The three-cluster solution resulting from the previous step was incorporated into a nonhierarchical k-means cluster analysis. The centroids (i.e., the standardized APS-R subscale means) from the three-cluster solution were used as the initial starting points in the k-means cluster analysis. Three clusters were specified for the analysis, and a solution converged in 10 iterations. The nonhierarchical analysis placed 38 participants in the first cluster (15.9%), 103 participants in the second cluster (43.1%), and 98 participants in the third cluster (41%).

Cluster labels were determined by calculating between-cluster tests of mean differences of non-standardized APS-R subscale scores. Clusters 1 and 3 wereidentified as groups of perfectionists byvirtue of their high Standards and Order

mean scores, whereas Cluster 2 was labeled the non-perfectionist group due to their relatively lower scores on these subscales. Discrepancy scores were used to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists. Due to their high Discrepancy scores, Cluster 1 appeared to be composed of maladaptive perfectionists, while the group with low Discrepancy scores (Cluster 3) was identified as adaptive perfectionists (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Distribution of Participants with Regard to their Perfectionism*

Perfectionism	Frequency	Percent
Maladaptive Perfectionists	38	15.9%
Non-perfectionists	103	43.1%
Adaptive Perfectionists	98	41.0%
Total	239	100.0

The means and standard deviations of the participants with different perfectionism levels, clustered according to their scores on APS-R, by computing one-way ANOVA was shown in Table 2. The F value indicated that there were no significant differences at $p<.05$ level ($F=.515$, $p>.05$) among different perfectionist groups. In other words, adaptive, maladaptive, and non-perfectionists did not differ significantly on their English achievement scores.

Table 2. *Comparison of Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for Participants with Different Perfectionism Levels (N = 239)*
($N = 239$)

	Adaptive Perfectionists (n = 98)		Maladaptive Perfectionists (n = 38)		Non-Perfectionists (n = 103)		F	P
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
English Score	10.36	4.57	9.72	4.50	10.59	4.50	.515	.598

The mean difference The mean difference is significant at .05 level.

Although, the analysis revealed that there was no significant relationship between perfectionism and English achievement, as it was shown in Table 4.2, Maladaptive Perfectionists' mean score (M=9.72) was lower than that of Adaptive Perfectionists (M=10.36) and Non-perfectionists (M=10.59). Hence, it can be said that adaptive perfectionists and non-perfectionists performed slightly better than maladaptive perfectionists on the English test.

This finding was somewhat consistent with the results in studies by Pishghadam&Akhondpoor (2011), and Roohafza (2010) in Iran and other studies by Arthur and Hayward (1997), Conroy (2003) in which an association between perfectionism and academic achievement had been found. According to these studies, although both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists strive to achieve, it is suggested that maladaptive perfectionism has a negative impact on academic achievement, while adaptive perfectionism can have a positive impact.

For instance, Pishghadam and Akhondpoor (2011) investigated the role of learner perfectionism in foreign language learning success, academic achievement, and learner anxiety. The results of the correlational analysis indicated a negative significant relationship between skills of reading, speaking, listening, and GPA. Altogether, the findings of the study showed how perfectionistic tendencies in language learners were associated with low academic achievement and poor performance in language skills.

Also, Arthur and Hayward (1997) found that socially-prescribed perfectionism in first year tertiary students was associated with lower academic achievement. Conroy (2003) suggested that a fear of failure in perfectionists has been associated with problems in achievement. The finding of the present study and its inconsistency with the results of the studies above can be interpreted from different points of view. Firstly, this study is limited to high school third-graders in Chenaran, and as it was mentioned previously, the findings of the study cannot simply be generalized to all other cases. Also, studies which have aimed at investigating the relationship between perfectionism and language achievement are quite scarce; hence, the results of studies in this domain still need to be scrutinized.

A few limitations of the study need to be stated. The first limitation of the study is using a self-report questionnaire as measure of perfectionism. A structured interview would be a better instrument to avoid the subjective perception of the subject in answering the self-report questionnaire, but it would be also more time consuming for the researcher.

The second limitation is that only third-grade high school students constituted the sample of the study. Therefore, the findings can hardly be generalized to the students of other grades in high schools. Nonetheless, the researcher believes the findings can still be beneficial for high school teachers since there is not much difference between the third-grade students and those at the other grades regarding the textbook and the English language learning environment.

In spite of these limitations, the researcher believes this study should provide some helpful insights for educators, teachers and students as how influential such personal variable as perfectionism will be in learners' English achievement.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study was aimed to investigate the relationship between perfectionism and English academic achievement among high school third-graders in Chenaran. The data were collected through the participants' responses to the questionnaires and their scores on final English exam. A total of 239 high school third-graders in Chenaran

participated in the survey during the 2010-11 academic year. The affective extent of the participants was measured by the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R). The participants were also asked to complete the individual's background information.

Generally speaking, EFL learning is a very sophisticated process and a number of variables, including personal variables, affect this process. In addition, although an association between perfectionism and academic achievement has been found in a number of previous studies, perfectionism was not proved to be of great significance in the EFL learning process in the current study. Nevertheless it was concluded that maladaptive perfectionists were not as successful as adaptive and non-perfectionists regarding their performance on the final English exam. Perfectionism was also found to be higher for females rather than males.

Since maladaptive perfectionists tend to set unachievable and unrealistic goals for themselves, and such setting of goals would lead to failure and anxiety, teachers need to inform their students of the negative outcomes of being a maladaptive perfectionist and try to reduce this trait in their students to a more adaptive one.

According to the findings of various studies, including Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), measures designed to help perfectionist learners may also aid high-anxious students. With this regard, a number of recommendations for teachers to deal with perfectionist students are provided here, some may be helpful to reduce the students' language anxiety as well, such as: (a) creating a warm atmosphere in the classroom, (b) helping students see that making errors is not unusual in language learning, (c) projecting themselves as a caring teacher who wants to nurture learning, not as a powerful figure bent on assessing students' interventions,

(d) fostering changes for the better rather than demanding flawlessness, (e) pointing out to learners how perfectionism can be detrimental to their progress, (f) giving assurances that they will receive any assistance they may require, and (g) providing that assistance.

In view of the limitations of this study, the following suggestions for future studies are recommended.Firstly, the participants in this study are limited to a sample of 239 high school third-graders. Therefore, a replication of this study involving a larger sample of students would provide further support for the generalizability of the findings.Secondly, the data were collected only by questionnaires. Qualitative research, including classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers, can provide further layers of analysis. That is, qualitative studies might also provide more detailed insight as researchers seek to explain how learners' perfectionism would relate to their language achievement.Thirdly, the results of the current study suggest that perfectionism is not significantly related to English achievement, and this is not consistent with the findings of other studies. Hence, a replication of the study is recommended, using other methods of collecting data, in order to clarify this controversy in findings.

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