On the Relationship between Imposter Phenomenon and Language Proficiency: A Case Study of Shiraz University Non-Major MA Candidates

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Abstract

According to Heshmat (2000), as many as 70 percent of all professionals have experienced the feeling of being a fraud in relation to their work or personal lives while those people who suffer from the imposter phenomenon are usually high-achievers. Regarding this important point, the objectives of the present study are three-folded: First, the study aimed at investigating the relationship between the Imposter Phenomenon (IP) and Language Proficiency (LP) among the Iranian non-major MA candidates. Second, the study intended to check the effect of age, gender, and also major on both the imposter phenomena and language proficiency. Finally, the present study tended to investigate which of the above-mentioned variables predict the language proficiency or imposter phenomena. Participants were 146 Shiraz University Non-English major students who first took a language proficiency test, devised by the experts in the field of TEFL at Shiraz University, and then filled out a questionnaire on imposter phenomenon (Harvey, 1982). The obtained data was then analyzed by both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that there is no significant relationship between IP and LP. Also among the variables of the study namely, age, gender, and major, age and major were the factors which could predict the language proficiency of the language learners.

Key Words: imposter phenomenon (IP), language proficiency (LP), multiple regressions, correlation

1. Introduction

Clance and Imes (1978) introduced the term "Imposter Phenomenon" to describe the feeling of intellectual phoniness experienced by certain high-achievers. They state that in spite of outstanding academic or professional accomplishments, some individuals believe that they are not really bright and intelligent; and that they have somehow fooled the world. Clance and Imes (1978) also believe that these individuals tend to attribute their success to luck or interpersonal skills, and they display generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression, and frustration due to their inability to meet their own standards of achievement. Kleinfeld (2008) introduces the imposter phenomenon as a catchy term to describe an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which may lead to anxiety and feeling of insecurity. King and Cooley (1995) believe that the imposter phenomenon is an intense feeling of intellectual in-authenticity which is usually experienced by many high-achieving individuals. According to Wick (1997) imposter phenomenon is the persistent belief in one's lack of competence, skill or intelligence in the face of consistent objective data to the contrary. This phenomenon causes an internal experience and feeling of intellectual fraudulence which is common particularly among high achievers. It makes a person believe that one is not deserving one's career success and that others have been deceived into thinking otherwise. It also brings about an intense subjective fear of the inability to repeat past success; a self-concept that one's record of accomplishment is not due to ability but rather only to luck, fate, charm, attractiveness, or influencing other people's impression. In addition, imposter phenomenon highlights the belief that one is truly less intelligent and competent than s/he appears to be. It also results in an unrealistic sense of one's competence in which one exaggerates or does not tolerate any deficiencies or weaknesses.

Language itself is a complex concept to define which adds to the hardness of explaining the related terms. Unfortunately there is no consensus about the definition of language proficiency. Cummins (1984) states that language proficiency is composed of 64 separate language components while some researchers believe that it is a unitary trait. There is also no common operational definition used by all sayings to define what it means to be limited English proficient (Rivera, 1995).

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) defines English language proficiency as the following:

A fully English proficient student is able to use English to ask questions, to understand teachers, and reading materials, to test ideas, and to

challenge what is being asked in the classroom. Four language skills contribute to proficiency as follows:

1. *Reading*: the ability to comprehend and interpret text at the age and grade-appropriate level.
2. *Listening*: the ability to understand the language of the teacher and instruction, comprehend and extract information, and follow the instructional discourse through which teachers provide information.
3. *Writing:* the ability to produce written text with content and format fulfilling classroom assignments at the age and grade-appropriate level.
4. *Speaking*: the ability to use oral language appropriately and effectively in learning activities (such as peer tutoring, collaborative learning activities, and question/answer sessions) within the classroom and in social interactions within the school. (1992, p. 7)

Canales (1994) provides a definition for language proficiency which is predicted on a socio-theoretical foundation. What this means is that language is more than just the sum of discrete parts (e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar). It develops within a culture for the purpose of conveying the beliefs and customs of that culture. Anyone who has ever tried to translate an idiom from one language to another understands this premise. A "bump on a log" in English means someone who is lazy or a do-nothing, but the non-English speaker has to assimilate the idiom rather than the meaning of each individual word in order to make sense of the phrase. Canales (1994) says that language usage:

"a. is dynamic and contextually-based (varies depending
upon the situation, status of the speakers, and the topic);
b. is discursive (requires connected speech); and
c. requires the use of integrative skills to achieve
communicative competence". (p. 60)

In this study an attempt is made to find the relationship, if there is any, between language proficiency and imposter phenomena regarding age, gender and major variables. In the following part, the background to the study is presented.

2. Literature Review

The background of this study is presented in two parts; firstly, the literature on the imposter phenomenon and its relation to the learner's achievement are presented. In the second part, the readers are provided with the

operational definition of the language proficiency and the related studies. At the end, studies which relate these two constructs are discussed.

2.1 Imposter Phenomenon (IP)

As it was mentioned before, IP is a psychological syndrome which causes the individuals to feel that they are not capable or intelligent enough, even if they are high achievers. According to Arena and Page (1992), "The imposter phenomenon describes individuals who at times feel as if they are imposters in their chosen profession. Individuals experiencing the phenomenon have a deep feeling that they are fooling everyone" (p. 121). Clance and Imes (1978) state that, "certain early family dynamics and later introjections of societal sex-role stereotyping appear to contribute significantly to the development of the impostor phenomenon" (p. 241). Clance and Imes (1978) believe that IP is much more redundant in high-achieving women. In their clinical work they indicated that women were primarily the ones who reported this phenomenon, but that whether or not it occurred with men, needed to be investigated. Later research for example those conducted by Imes (1979), Harvey, (1981), Lawler, (1984), and Flewelling (1985) revealed that men do experience the phenomenon with as much frequency as women. Topping (1983), in her study of university faculty, found the males in her sample were considerably more likely to experience the impostor phenomenon than were the females. Her explanation was that the women may have had to work through more of their IP feelings in order to become faculty members. Although men do not openly acknowledge the Impostor Phenomenon as frequently as women do, when queried in an anonymous and confidential setting they did indicate the presence of these feelings.

In a similar way, Kleinfeld (2008) also states that many researchers suppose that the imposter phenomenon was more common among talented women. Harvey (1982), on the other hand argues that there is not that much difference between men and women. According to his studies in this area, men or women who have failed to internalize their success could come to view themselves as imposters (cited in Fried-Buchalter, 1992). While Topping and Kimmel (1985) found that male professors scored higher than female professors on a measurement of IP, other researchers such as Kleinfield (2008) many men experience the same fears, too. Therefore, as it can be seen there is controversy over the relationship and effect of gender on the IP.

This feeling is also present among non-native teachers of English. Bernat(2008) believes that in an EFL teaching context a special kind of

impostorhood exists where the feelings of inauthenticity or fraudulence are not specifically related to high achievement (although they may well be), but are related to feelings of inadequacy in the role of a language teacher or 'language expert' of one's non-native tongue. The findings of this study supported that the non-native speaker teachers (NNSTs) Impostor Syndrome exists among the participants, though somewhat more strongly in the case of females (which seem to support the findings of other impostor syndrome studies noted earlier). In another study, Tang (1997) reports on a survey of 47 NNSTs in Hong Kong, examining perceptions of their own proficiency and competency, as compared with those of NSTs. Her subjects felt that NSTs were superior to NNSTs in areas of fluency such as speaking (100%), pronunciation (92%), and listening (87%). Tang found that NNS teachers "were felt to be associated with accuracy rather than fluency" (Tang, 1997: 578). The results of this study clearly show that NNSTs perceive their NST counterparts as far superior in oral and aural proficiency, than they are. Bresette, O'Neill, Scapino, Walters, Walsh and Woods (2005) investigated the relationship between imposter phenomenon and academic achievement among high school students. The findings showed that a greater experience of imposter phenomenon significantly correlated with higher academic achievement.

2.2 Language Proficiency (LP)

Zareva et al. (2005) conducted a study on the relationship between lexical competence and language proficiency. It was revealed that some aspects, such as quality and quantity of L2 lexical competence, develop as the proficiency of the L2 learners increases, whereas others, such as learners' metacognitive awareness, are not proficiency dependent. It was also suggested that the measures that were identified as sensitive to capturing the overall state of L2 learners' vocabularies would also be reliable indexes of learners' proficiency development.

In another study, Mohammadi (2007) investigated if the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) among Iranian EFL learners correlate and can predict each other. Also the roles of gender, age and different years of university study on both FLCA and FLRA were taken into consideration. The findings showed that different years of university study do not play a role in neither FLCA nor FLRA, but both age and gender affect the FLCA and FLRA. It was also revealed that there is a positive and significant relationship between FLCA and FLRA. Finally it was found that both of the variables

(FLCA and FLRA) can predict each other. That is to say, FLCA anxiety can predict FLRA, and vice versa.

Hassani (2005) aimed at investigating the role of EFL proficiency, gender, and the interaction of motivation type (intrinsic/extrinsic), gender, and levels of English achievement (high, mid, and low). Also the role of major and educational year play on learners' type of motivation was studied. The outcomes of the study revealed that the learners were mostly intrinsically motivated. It was also made clear that there was no significant interaction among motivation, gender, and level of English proficiency.

Salamian (2002), in a study intended to investigate whether there was any relationship between field dependence/independence (FD/I) and the students' performance on global and local questions of listening comprehension (LC) as well as the interaction between FD/I and the question type. It also tried to investigate the relationship between FD/I and LC in general. The findings showed that there was no relationship between FD/I and the students' performance on global questions. However, there was a relationship between FD/I and the students' performance on local questions. Also, there was an interaction between FD/I and question type in listening comprehension. In other words, FI students answered local questions better than global ones. And finally, there was no relationship between FD/I and the students' performance on the *Global* test.

In a study conducted by Fijani (2005), it was tried to find out whether below-and above-average EFL students differed in terms of restoring short-range and long-range cloze items. The results of two paired t-test showed that both low-and-high proficiency groups scored significantly higher on short-range items. It was concluded that low-and-high proficiency EFL learners perform differently on the two types of items, and short-range cloze items are easier for EFL learners to restore. It was also concluded that below average students do not have easy access to long-range constraint.

Rezaeian (2001) investigated the relationship between field dependence/independence as a cognitive style and foreign language proficiency considering some other variables as sex and age in Iranian language learners. The results showed that field dependence/independence was a significant factor affecting the performance of the students on the proficiency test. Also, age and sex were found to affect the degree of field dependence/independence in Iranian language learners. Based on this review, the objectives and the research questions are presented in the followings sections.

2.3 Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

The relationship between the imposter phenomena and language proficiency of the learners became of great interest to the researchers of the present study. Accordingly, the effects of sex, gender, and also major on both the imposter phenomena and language proficiency were examined. Furthermore, there was an attempt to understand which of the aforementioned variables can be a good predictor of language proficiency or imposter phenomena. To this end, the following research questions were developed:

1. Is there any significant relationship between imposter phenomenon and language proficiency?
2. Is there any significant difference between the Iranian male and female MA students regarding their language proficiency and IP?
3. Is there any significant difference among the Iranian MA students with different majors concerning their language proficiency and IP?
4. Is there any relationship between the Iranian MA students of different ages, their language proficiency and imposter phenomenon?
5. Among three variables of age, gender and major of the study, which one(s) predict(s) language proficiency and imposter phenomenon?

3. Method

This section introduces the participants included in this study, specifying how, where and in what ways they were selected. Moreover, it provides the readers with some information on the instruments used and procedures for data collection and analysis.

3.1 Participants

The initial participants of this study were 212 Shiraz University Non-English major students who were selected based on convenience sampling technique. They were also of different ages. After data gathering, some of the incomplete forms and questionnaires were excluded. As a result, the number of the sample reduced to 146 students who cooperatively answered the intended items of the questionnaire and had high response validity.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments chosen were as the following:

3.2.1 Proficiency test

The language proficiency test for the study consisted of 30 structure items, 40 vocabulary items and 30 reading comprehension items. This test was devised by the experts in the field of TEFL at Shiraz University. The face and content validity of the test were checked and approved by the experts in the field of TEFL. Moreover, test-rest reliability was run and the outcome was .91 which is a very good and quite acceptable index.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

The imposter phenomenon questionnaire used in this study was developed by Harvey (1982). It contains 14 items with a 7-point Likert-type format. Harvey (1982) reported an internal consistency reliability estimate of 0.85, based on a sample of 74 subjects, and a cross-validation reliability estimate of 0.74, based on a sample of 72. Topping and Kimmel (1985) utilized Harvey's IP scale in their study of university faculty members, reporting reliabilities of 0.73 for men and 0.76 for women. Using Cronbach alpha, Baharloo (2008) reported a reliability estimate of 0.82 based on a sample of 151 college students. She also utilized a statistical factor analysis in order to check the validity level of the imposter phenomenon questionnaire, the loading of the items showed that the questionnaire was valid enough.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The two instruments of the study, namely, the questionnaire and the proficiency test were given to the participants in a single session. At first the test of proficiency was given to them and they were asked to answer the questions after explaining what they had to do. When the students completed the test, the questionnaire was given to the participants followed by a general clarification. Then they completed the questionnaire. At the end the papers were collected. After reviewing the papers the incomplete ones were discarded. The remaining papers were the data of the study which were analyzed by both descriptive and inferential statistics. In using descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation were checked. And the inferential statistics used in the study included correlation, regression, t-test, and one-way ANOVA.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. As it can be seen with the total number of 146 participants the mean and standard deviation were 47.08 and 10.42, respectively.

Table 1
Basic Descriptive Statistics for the Particiapnts' Lanaguge Proficiency

Factor	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Proficiency	146	10	81	47.08	10.42

Table 2 presents the correlation between the IP and language proficiency. It can be observed that the correlation was not significant.

Table 2
Correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Language Proficiency

Variables	Imposter Phenomenon	Proficiency
Imposter Phenomenon	1	-.09
Proficiency	-.09	1

Independent sample t-test was run to check if there was any difference between the males and females performance on the proficiency test and the Imposter phenomenan. The results presented in Tables 3 and 4 revealed that the differences were not significant.

Table 3
Independant Sample t-test for Male and Female's Proficiency

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.
Male	80	46.92	10.35	-.191	.849
Female	66	47.25	10.59		

Table 5 summarizes the results of Analysis of Variance between majors and language proficiency. Surprisingly, the students in the fields of humanities and social science performed significantly better on the language proficiency test. It can be explained in this way that these students have a higher command of English due to their major.

Table 4
Independant Sample t-test for Male and Female's Imposter Phenomenon

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.
Male	80	40.03	5.67	-.780	.437
Female	66	40.71	4.55		

Table 5
Analysis of Variance for Majors and Language Proficiency

Majors	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Humanities & Social sciences	39	50.35	13.10	4.649	.003*
Engineering & Architecture	16	45.87	5.94		
Agriculture & Veterinarian	51	46.76	9.08		
Basic Sciences	40	44.75	10.03		
Total	146	47.07	10.42		

Analysis of Variance was also conducted for majors and imposter phenomenon. It was revealed that there was no difference in performance on the imposter phenomena test according to different majors.

Table 6
Analysis of Variance for Majors and Imposter Phenomenon

Majors	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Humanities & Social sciences	39	40.48	4.22	2.083	.105
Engineering & Architecture	16	42.50	8.60		
Agriculture & Veterinarian	51	39.90	4.81		
Basic Sciences	40	39.90	4.72		
Total	146	40.34	5.19		

In Tables 7 and 8, the correlation among the varibles of age and language proficiency on the one hand and age and Imposter phenomena on the other hand was tested. It was revealed that age is correlated neither with Language proficiency nor with the Imposter phenomena.

Table 7
Correlation between Age and Language Proficiency

Variables	Age	Proficiency
Age	1	-.158
Proficiency	-.158	1

Table 8
Correlation between Age and Imposter Phenomenon

Variables	Age	Imposter Phenomenon
Age	1	.03
Imposter Phenomenon	.03	1

To check the effect of the three variables over language proficiency, multiple regressions was carried out. The results revealed that age and major were two significant independent variables which can predict language proficiency.

Table 9
Multiple Regressions for Age, Major, Gender and Proficiency

Variables	Beta	t	Sig.
Age	-.164	-.200	.47*
Major	.034	.402	.015*
Gender	-.204	-2.46	.688

- Dependent Variable: Proficiency Score
- Significant at .05

Table 10
Stepwise Multiple Regressions for Age, Major, Gender and Proficiency

Steps	Predicting Variable(s)	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	The Std. Error of the Estimate
First	Major*	.190	.036	.029	10.27
Second	Major + Age**	.253	.064	.051	10.15

*Predictors: (Constant), MAJOR
** Predictors: (Constant), MAJOR, AGE

In the same direction, multiple regressions were conducted for the imposter phenomena. And the findings of this analysis showed no significant prediction power of variables for the imposter phenomena.

In this part based on the descriptive and inferential statistics the results are discussed and accordingly the research questions are answered. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the participants (mean=47.08, SD=10.42).

Question 1: Is there any significant relationship between imposter phenomenon and language proficiency?

Table 11
Multiple Regressions for Age, Major, Gender and Imposter Phenomenon

Variables	Beta	t	Sig.
Age	.020	.240	.810
Major	.085	.993	.323
Gender	-.089	-1.04	.297

- Dependent Variable: Imposter Phenomenon
- Significant at .05

The results show that there is no significant relationship between the imposter phenomena and language proficiency ($p < 0.05$). In other words, scores on language proficiency score is not associated with the extent to which the students feel impostered and vice versa. So, this study does not prove nor reject the studies which relate high achievement to the imposter phenomena at least in the realm of language proficiency.

Question 2: Is there any significant difference between the Iranian male and female MA students regarding their language proficiency and IP?

The data presented in Table 4.3 indicates that there is no significant difference between males and females regarding the language proficiency.

Imposter phenomena does not exist more in neither of the sexes. Researchers such as Clance and Imes (1978) believe that imposterhood exists more in women. But Topping and Kimmel (1985) found that male professors scored higher than female professors on a measurement of IP. On the other hand, some like Harvey (1982) argues that there is not that much difference between men and women. This study is in line with the studies which do not relate the imposter phenomena and gender.

Question 3: Is there any significant difference among the Iranian MA students with different majors concerning their language proficiency and IP?

There is no significant difference between the students of different majors (engineering and architecture, agriculture and veterinarian, and basic sciences) in relation to their language proficiency. Just the students of humanities and social sciences had a significant performance.

It should be stated that none of the majors performed meaningfully and differently on the imposter phenomenon test.

Question 4: Is there any relationship between the Iranian MA students of different ages, their language proficiency and imposter phenomenon?

While some studies support the relationship between Age and language proficiency, the present study revealed no significant correlation.

It was revealed that age is correlated neither with language proficiency nor with the imposter phenomena.

Question 5: Among three variables of age, gender and major of the study, which one(s) predict(s) language proficiency and imposter phenomenon?

Multiple regressions were run to check which of the variables can predict language proficiency. It was revealed that age and major can do so. To check which variable can predict the imposter phenomenon the same process was repeated. As it is clear from table 4.11, among the variables none of the aforementioned variables can predict imposter phenomenon.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed at investigating the relationship between imposter phenomena and language proficiency among the Iranian learners. Accordingly, the effects of certain variables, namely, age, major, and gender over the imposter phenomena and language proficiency were investigated. As mentioned before, the feeling of imposterhood causes the person plagued with the fear that he is not capable or intelligent as others think they are, or that they cannot repeat their success and they will eventually be found as frauds, despite their outstanding accomplishments and frequent praises (Heshmat, 2000). The findings of the present study revealed that there is no relationship between the imposter syndrome and the language proficiency of the learners. This can be concluded that this feeling of intellectual phoniness may not be that much related to language proficiency of the learners. In the previous studies there was controversy over the relationship of gender and imposter phenomena. This study is in line with the studies that deny the effect of gender on imposterhood. Harvey (1982) believed that there is not that much difference between male and female regarding this syndrome. Also, Kleinfield (2008) affirms that many men experience the imposterhood like women. Age and major were revealed to have no relationship to the imposter phenomena. The effect of gender on language proficiency was also examined and it revealed that there was no significant difference between male and female language proficiency. Regarding the major and age, the study showed that there is a difference among participants of different ages and different majors and age and major could predict the language proficiency of the language learners.

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