



كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية
College of Education for Human Sciences

ISSN: 1817-6798 (Print)

Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

available online at: www.jtuh.org/

JTUH
مجلة جامعة تكريت للعلوم الانسانية
Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

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Keywords:

language proficiency
theories of stress,
reading
writing
listening

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 Sept 2024
Received in revised form 25 Nov 2024
Accepted 2 Dec 2024
Final Proofreading 30 June 2025
Available online 30 June 2025

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Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

Academic Stress and Language Proficiency: A Correlational Study

ABSTRACT

Language proficiency depends on several factors. One of these factors is academic stress. Academic stress is now seen as a lifestyle dilemma. Students that are under a lot of academic stress have been known to experience behavioral issues, depression, anxiety, and other issues. The present study aims at finding out: 1-Iraqi EFL university students' level of academic stress toward language proficiency. 2- The correlation between Iraqi EFL university students' with academic stress and language proficiency. The total population of the study represents 300 college students who are studying in morning studies in the departments of English at the Colleges of Education of the universities of Tikrit and Samarra during the academic year 2023-2024. The sample of the present study is 160 third- year college students who are randomly selected from the department of English at the College of Education of the University of Tikrit. The study instruments include an academic stress questionnaire and language proficiency test. The language proficiency test is prepared and all instruments are submitted to specialists in the field of teaching English as a foreign language and linguistics to ensure its face validity. The reliability of the study instruments has been secured by using Alpha Cronbach method. The values obtained are satisfactory to ensure their reliability. Then, the study instruments are administrated to the sample students. T-Test of one coefficient and multiple regressions are used to analyze the data obtained and achieve the study aims. The major findings of this study can be summarized as follows: 1- It is concluded that Iraqi EFL university students have a low level of academic stress. 2- It was found that academic stress has a negative effect on language proficiency. In the light of the results certain conclusion are formulated, most important of which are: 1- Academic stress negatively impacts language proficiency. 2- Academic stress is a multidimensional concept that is especially present in educational environments.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.32.6.2.2025.24>

الضغط الاكاديمي و الكفاءة اللغوية: دراسة ارتباطية

فاتن علوم محمد/ وزارة التربية/ المديرية العامة لتربية صلاح الدين

نغم قدوري يحيى/ جامعة تكريت /كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

الخلاصة:

تعتمد الكفاءة اللغوية على عدة عوامل، ويعد الضغط الأكاديمي اهم العوامل المؤثرة فيها. حيث يشكل الضغط الأكاديمي ازمة في نمط حياة الطالب، لاسيما حين يكون الاكتئاب، القلق، المشاكل السلوكية، والتردد... الخ جزء من مشاكل كثيرة يواجهها الطلبة الذين يعانون من مستوى ضغط اكاديمي عالٍ. لذلك تم اجراء الدراسة الحالية لمعرفة العلاقة الارتباطية بين الضغط الأكاديمي والكفاءة اللغوية لطلبة الجامعة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية. تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى ايجاد 1.مستوى الضغط الأكاديمي تجاه الكفاءة اللغوية لدى طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية. 2.العلاقة الارتباطية لدى طلبة الجامعة الدارسين للغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية بين الضغط الاكاديمي و الكفاءة اللغوية. مجموع مجتمع الدراسة يمثل 300 طالب في الدراسة الصباحية في قسم اللغة الانكليزية في كليتي التربية لجامعتي تكريت وسامراء خلال العام الدراسي (2023-2024). عينة الدراسة الحالية هي 160 طالب جامعي من المرحلة الثالثة والذين تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من قسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية التربية جامعة تكريت. تتضمن ادوات البحث استبيان (الضغط الاكاديمي) واختبار كفاءة اللغة. تم اعداد اختبار كفاءة اللغة من قبل الباحث وتم تقديمه الى المختصين في مجال طرائق التدريس واللغة للتأكد من صدق الاختبار.

الكلمات المفتاحية ، إتقان اللغة، نظرية الاهتمام، القراءة، الامراض، الاستماع

Statement of the Problem

According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011), academic issues are the most popular source of stress for college students. Academic stress, such as ongoing study, writing papers, preparing for tests, boring professors, exams and test preparation, grade level competitiveness, and gaining a significant quantity of knowledge in a short time, were the most critical daily problems. When college students face excessive or negative stress, they suffer physical and psychological consequence.

1.2 Aims of the Study

The present study aims at finding out:

- 1- Iraqi EFL university students' level of academic stress toward language proficiency.
- 2- The correlation between Iraqi EFL university students' with academic stress and language proficiency.

1.3 Hypotheses of the Study

There is no statistically significant correlation in Iraqi EFL university students' academic stress and language proficiency.

1.4 Limits of the Study

1-Iraqi EFL university 3rd year students in the department of English, university of Tikrit, and Sammarra.

2-The academic year 2023/2024.

3-Language proficiency: listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

1.5 Value of the Study

The study is hoped to be valuable for:

Students: Learning to manage and deal with academic stress which caused by exams and academic achievement.

Teachers: Using suitable strategies and techniques to help students overcome their academic stress.

Curriculum Designer: Using diverse activities in the curriculum that the teacher can monitor to improve students' language proficiency. To reduce stress, periodic training courses should be given to teachers to keep them updated with the latest strategies.

1.6 Definition of the Basic Term

Academic Stress: Decillo et al. (2017) define academic stress as the tension, biological and psychological, relating to the amount of work and pressure given by the academic life as perceived by the students.

Operational Definition: Academic stress is the educational pressure, anxiety, or conflict that results from the interaction between environmental stress and learning stress, which affects academic achievement.

Language proficiency: Lee and Schallert (1997) define language proficiency as a learner's ability to do or know the subject application in a real-life situation.

Operational definition: language proficiency refer to individuals ability to read, write, speak and comprehend a language at a standard essential to succeed in an academic setting.

2.1 The Concept of Academic Stress

Misra and McKean (2000) identify academic stress as a multifaceted construct encompassing academic, emotional, and social pressures. Numerous factors might induce academic stress, including workload, the need to excel in examinations, and societal expectations. It is essential to identify the unique stressors affecting pupils and devise strategies to assist them in managing these

challenges. According to Tus (2020), numerous critical factors influence students' academic success. Academic stress constitutes one of those elements.

2.2 Theories of Stress

According to Burr (1995), stress theories are social theories that explain observations about stress, an aspect of social life. To explain observations, theories use concepts that represent classes of phenomena. Two theories represent distinct approaches to the field of stress research:

Selye (1976) suggests that theories of stress focus on the specific relationship between external demands (stressors) and bodily processes (stress) and can be grouped into two different categories: approaches to 'systemic stress' based in physiology and psychobiology, among others, and approaches to 'psychological stress' developed within the field of cognitive psychology developed by Lazarus and his group.

2.3 Language Proficiency

Basta (2011) defines language proficiency as the ability level of a person to use a language both for basic communication with others and academic purposes. In another way, language proficiency is defined by Wikipedia that the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language.

Baclig(2020) views that language proficiency goes beyond the attainment of some knowledge or skill; it is the application of knowledge or skill. There are four main skills of a language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills can be described in educational purposes in the following way:

I. Listening: is the ability to understand the language of the teachers and instructions in the classroom, comprehend and extract information, and follow the instructional dialogue through which teachers provide information.

II. Speaking: It is the ability to use oral language properly and effectively in learning activities within the classroom and in social interactions within the school.

III. Reading: Reading is the ability to comprehend various texts and using them for different purposes at the age and grade-appropriate level.

IV. Writing: It is the ability to produce written texts with content and format to complete classroom assignments at the age and grade-appropriate level.

3. Procedures

3.1 Population and Sampling

The population in the present study represent 300 college students who are studying in morning studies in the Department of English at Tikrit University and Sammarra college during the academic year 2022-2023.

The sample of the present study is 160 third-year college students who are randomly selected from the department of English at the College of Education for Humanities of the University of Tikrit during the academic year 2022-2023.

3.2 Research Instrument

3.2.1 Academic Stress Questionnaire

The academic stress questionnaire is adopted from Bedewy and Gabriel (2013). It consists of (15) items. It is scored according to five points (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree), given the score (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) respectively for the negative items and vice versa for the positive items.

A total score for the questionnaire is calculated by summing the scores obtained by the respondent for each score chosen. Therefore, the highest score that the respondent can receive is (75). The lowest score he gets is (15).

3.1.2 Language Proficiency Test

The language proficiency test consists of four parts, the first is devoted to reading skill, which includes (10) objective items; a score of (2) is given for the correct answer for each item and (zero) for the wrong answer, and the total score is (20).

The second part deals with writing skill, which includes essay writing to be scored according to (5) essay indicators; the highest score of each indicator is (4), and the lowest score is (1), and the total score is (20).

The third part of language proficiency test is dedicated to listening skill, it includes (10) objective items. The total score is (20), given a score of (2) for the correct answer for each item and (zero) for the wrong answer.

The last part is devoted for the speaking skill, which take the form of interview to be scored according to (4) speaking indicators, the highest score for the indicator (5) and the lowest score (1); the total score is also (20).

3.3 Construct validity of the questionnaires

The researcher verified the construct validity of the questionnaire through two indicators:

1. Discrimination power of items indicate distinguishing between high- level and low- level individuals.
2. Internal consistency, Palmer & Groot (1981).

3.3.1 The discriminating power of items

The final version of the scale, excluding non-distinctive items or modifying them and testing them again.

After applying the scale to the sample members, which numbered (160) students, correcting the answer forms, and to extract the discriminatory power of the scale items, the scores of the sample members were arranged from the highest total score to the lowest total score, and the two extreme groups in the total score were identified at (27%) in each group.

The number of individuals in each group was (43) students. The grades of the upper group ranged between (64-73) degrees, and the grades of the lower group ranged between (37-54) degrees.

The t-test for two independent samples was used to calculate the difference between the two groups in the scores of each item of the scale, on the basis that the calculated t-value represents the discriminatory power of the item, Nie, et al. (1975), see table (3-3).

Table (3-3)

The Discriminatory Power of the Academic Stress Questionnaire Items

Item no.	Group	Mean	S.D	t. test	
				Computed	Tabulated
1	Upper	3.814	0.906	4.447	1.99
	Lower	3.000	0.787		
2	Upper	4.186	0.795	9.476	1.99
	Lower	2.674	0.680		
3	Upper	4.419	0.499	11.214	1.99
	Lower	2.814	0.795		
4	Upper	4.558	0.502	12.560	1.99
	Lower	2.628	0.874		

5	Upper	4.698	0.599	9.162	1.99
	Lower	3.139	0.941		
6	Upper	4.326	0.778	7.272	1.99
	Lower	3.209	0.638		
7	Upper	4.605	0.541	14.665	1.99
	Lower	2.651	0.686		
8	Upper	4.442	0.548	3.061	1.99
	Lower	3.791	1.283		
9	Upper	4.349	0.482	5.420	1.99
	Lower	3.605	0.760		
10	Upper	4.488	0.506	7.549	1.99
	Lower	3.698	0.465		
11	Upper	3.279	1.419	3.792	1.99
	Lower	2.163	1.308		
12	Upper	4.512	0.506	9.745	1.99
	Lower	3.069	0.828		
13	Upper	4.395	0.541	8.345	1.99
	Lower	3.419	0.545		
14	Upper	4.767	0.427	12.015	1.99
	Lower	2.907	0.921		
15	Upper	4.837	0.433	12.768	1.99
	Lower	2.884	0.905		

* The tabular T-value at a significance level of (0.05) and a degree of freedom (84) equals (1.99).

After calculating the t-test value for all items of the academic stress scale, it was found that all values are greater than the tabulated value of (1.99) at a significance level of (0.05) and a degree of freedom (84), which indicates that all items have discriminatory power between individuals who possess a higher limit of ability. And individuals who possess a minimum level of ability.

3.3.2 Internal Consistency (Items Validity)

The internal consistency is calculated as follows:

- Item total correlation.
- Item domain correlation. See table (3-4)

Table (3-4)

The Items Validity of the Academic Stress Questionnaire Items

Item no.	Item validity	Item no.	Item validity	Item no.	Item validity
1	0.407	6	0.583	11	0.409
2	0.659	7	0.731	12	0.693
3	0.773	8	0.337	13	0.596
4	0.707	9	0.542	14	0.702
5	0.749	10	0.361	15	0.812

*The critical value of the correlation coefficient at a significance level of (0.05) and a degree of freedom (158) is equal to (0.135).

It appears from Table (3-4) that all the values of the correlation coefficients calculated for all items of the academic stress scale are greater than the critical value of the correlation coefficient at a significance level of (0.05) and a degree of freedom (158), which indicates that all of the items are valid.

3.3.3 Face Validity of Academic Stress

The researcher verified the face validity of the current research scale when experts specializing in the English language agreed on the validity of the items and their suitability to the behavioral components in measuring academic stress. All the items received approval from (100%) or more experts.

3.3.4 Construct Validity of Academic Stress

The construct validity of the current research scale was verified through the ability of its items to distinguish between the answers of the two extreme groups for each item, as well as through the correlation of the scale items with the total score of the scale, as they were all statistically significant.

3.3.5 Reliability of Academic Stress

Reliability indicates the consistency of responses in all items of the scale. This type of reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which reached (0.875).

3.4 Construct Validity of Language Proficiency Test

3.4.1 Items Difficulty and Discrimination Power

To calculate the difficulty coefficients of the language proficiency test items and their discriminatory power, the test was applied to the research sample of (160) students; their answers were corrected, the total score was extracted, arranged in descending order, and the upper group and the lower group were determined, so

the number of each group reached (43) students at a rate of (27%). To calculate the difficulty coefficients of the items, add the number of correct answers in the upper group to the number of correct answers in the lower group and divide them by the number of members of the two groups. The item discrimination coefficients were calculated by subtracting the number of correct answers in the upper group from the number of correct answers in the lower group and dividing it by the number of members of one group. The values of the difficulty and discrimination coefficients for the items were calculated as shown in Table (3-5).

Table (3-5)

Items Difficulty and Discrimination Coefficients for the Language Proficiency Test (Reading Skill)

Question One								
Item no.	Upper Group		Lower Group		Difficulty		Discrimination	
	0	2	0	2	value	level	value	level
1	1	42	19	24	0.77	easy	0.42	Very good
2	10	33	41	2	0.41	Medium	0.72	Very good
3	1	42	20	23	0.76	easy	0.44	Very good
4	0	43	30	13	0.65	Medium	0.70	Very good
5	1	42	20	23	0.76	Medium	0.44	Very good
6	11	32	24	19	0.59	Medium	0.30	Good
7	2	41	21	22	0.73	easy	0.44	Very good
8	2	41	39	4	0.52	Medium	0.86	Very good
9	11	32	29	14	0.53	Medium	0.42	Very good
10	10	33	34	9	0.49	Medium	0.56	Very good

Table (3-6)

Items Difficulty and Discrimination Coefficients for the Language Proficiency Test (Writing Skill)

Question Two									
Item no.	group	Score				Difficulty		Discrimination	
		1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	Value	Level	Value	Level
Writing Authenticity	Upper	0	0	8	35	0.66	Medium	0.59	Very good
	Lower	23	20	0	0				
Content accordance with the title	Upper	0	0	1	42	0.30	Medium	0.59	Very good
	Lower	20	20	3	0				
Text Harmony	Upper	0	0	0	43	0.68	Medium	0.64	Very good
	Lower	29	9	5	0				
Vocabulary Selection	Upper	0	0	0	43	0.69	Medium	0.62	Very good
	Lower	27	10	6	0				
Grammar Options	Upper	0	0	10	33	0.61	Medium	0.66	Very good
	Lower	37	6	0	0				

Table (3-7)

Items Difficulty and Discrimination Coefficients for the Language Proficiency Test (Speaking Skill)

Question Three										
Item no.	group	Score					Difficulty		Discrimination	
		1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	Value	Level	Value	Level
Pronunciation	Upper	0	0	0	0	43	0.72	Easy	0.55	Very good
	Lower	6	22	14	1	0				
Grammar	Upper	0	0	0	11	32	0.60	Medium	0.71	Very good
	Lower	34	9	0	0	0				
Vocabulary	Upper	0	0	0	43	0	0.54	Medium	0.51	Very good
	Lower	29	9	5	0	0				
Fluency	Upper	0	0	0	43	0	0.55	Medium	0.50	Very good
	Lower	27	10	6	0	0				

If the difficulty coefficients are 0.19 or less, then the paragraph is very difficult; if they range between 0.20 - 0.29, then the paragraph is difficult; if they are between 0.30 - 0.69, then it is moderately difficult; if they are between 0.70 - 0.79, then the paragraph is easy; and if it is between 0.80 and more, then the paragraph is very easy. The acceptable range for difficulty of paragraphs ranges between 0.20 - 0.80.

If the discrimination coefficients are 0.19 or less, the item has poor discrimination and should be deleted from the test. If it ranges between 0.20 - 0.29, the item has borderline discrimination. The item will either be improved or deleted from the test and if it is between 0.20 and 0.29, then it has borderline discrimination. 0.30 - 0.69 is good, and it is preferable to improve the item, and if it is between 0.40 and more, then the item's discrimination is excellent.

3.4.2 Face Validity of Language Proficiency Test

The apparent validity of the linguistic proficiency test was achieved by presenting it to a group of experts and taking their opinions on the validity and suitability of the test.

3.4.3 Construct Validity of Language Proficiency Test

If the experimental results of the measurement match the theoretical assumptions, the test has construct validity. However, suppose the experimental results of the measurement do not match one or more theoretical assumptions. In that case, this indicates that the test is invalid or has a flaw or error in the theoretical assumptions. Since all the test items in which they were retained have broad levels of difficulty, extending from easy to difficult, and can discriminate between individuals, this indicates the construct's validity.

3.4.4 Reliability of Language Proficiency Test

The values of the reliability coefficients for the linguistic proficiency test were (0.819), which are good reliability coefficients that affect the internal consistency of the items; the high consistency of the items affects their homogeneity and the stability of the sound test, which is the degree of reliability. The stability coefficients are higher than those in previous studies.

3.4.5 Scoring Scheme of the Researcher Instruments

In the current study, the test and the questionnaires are scored using the scheme that best suits achieving the study's goals.

3.4.6 Scoring Scheme of Academic Stress Questionnaires

The score of the questionnaire is based on the Likert scale type. Likert Scale Type is a scale with several points, usually at least three but not more than seven. The questionnaires are a multiple-choice form of five alternatives.

3.4.6 Scoring Scheme of language proficiency Test

The test is scored of 80 points and consists of four questions. Each question is worth 20 marks. Question 1 has ten items and 2 marks for each item; question 2 has five criteria items and four marks for each item; question 3 has four criteria items and five marks for each item; and question 4 has ten items and 2 marks for each item.

4.1 Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.2 Result and Discussion

4.1.1 The Level of Academic Stress among Iraqi University Students Studying English as a Foreign Language

An academic stress questionnaire is administrated to the research sample to achieve this goal, the results are statistically manipulated and show that the mean of the scores is (57,681) with a standard deviation (7,736).

To know the difference between the arithmetic mean and the theoretical mean, which is (75), a t-test for one sample is used, and it is found that the differences is statistically significant at the level of significance (0.05), as the calculated t-value is (28,316), which is greater than the critical t-value (1,960), with a degree of freedom (159), as shown in table (4-1).

Table (4-1)

Results of the T-test for one Sample to Compare the Mean of the Research Sample on the Academic Stress Scale and the Theoretical Mean of the Scale

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Theoretical mean	T. Test	
					Computed	Tabulated
Academic Stress	160	57.681	7.736	75	28.316	1.960

***The value of the tabular T-test is at a significance level of (0.05) and a degree of freedom (159) equals (1.960).**

The table clearly shows that the T-value for academic stress is statistically significant, as the calculated T-value was higher than the tabulated one.

This indicates a statistically significant difference between the sample average on the academic stress scale and the theoretical average, with the research sample falling below the average, suggesting a low level of academic stress.

4.1.2 Correlational Relationship between Academic Stress and Language Proficiency among Iraqi University Students Studying English as a Foreign Language

To achieve this goal, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to calculate the correlation between the scores of the sample members, which numbered (160) students on the academic stress scale and their scores on the language proficiency test. Then the T-test was used to indicate the correlation coefficients, as shown in table (4-2).

Table (4-2)

The Value of the Correlation Coefficient between Academic Stress and Language Proficiency and Its Corresponding T-value

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient	T-test	
			Computed	Tabulated
Academic Stress	Language Proficiency	-0.376	5.081	1.960

***The value of the tabular t-test is at a significance level of (0.05) and a degree of freedom (158) equals (1.960).**

It is clear from table (4-2) that the correlation coefficient between academic stress and language proficiency is statistically significant, as the calculated T-values were higher than the tabulated one.

5.1 Conclusions, Recommendations

5.2 Conclusions

In the light of studying the present study the following conclusions are drawn:

- It is concluded that Iraqi EFL university students have a low level of academic stress. Academic stress is a multidimensional concept that is especially present in educational environments, and it is more frequent with homework, tests, misunderstanding the academic materials, and lack of time to complete tasks.

- Research reveals that academic stress negatively impacts language proficiency. That is, the higher the level of academic stress of the students in the research sample, the lower their language proficiency.

5.2 Recommendations

After surveying and discussing the results of the study, it is recommended:

For Teachers: It is very important to encourage faculty members to debate with their students about their stress levels and causes. This will make them aware of how to recognize stress in themselves and others, enabling them to articulate their thoughts.

For Students: Time and environment management are critical for students to avoid distractions while learning.

For Curriculum Designer: A curriculum designer should identify, perceive, and understand the language learners' social, cultural, and economic backgrounds to be able to help language learners have a clear image of themselves and respect their own characters.

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